

**MOTHER OF ISRAEL, DAUGHTER OF CHRIST: THE UNTOLD STORY OF  
THE BACKUS WOMEN**

**A THESIS**

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# **MOTHER OF ISRAEL, DAUGHTER OF CHRIST: THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE BACKUS WOMEN**

## **Abstract**

A key question that this thesis poses is how did Separate-Baptist women express their religious freedom while operating within their social structures in eighteenth-century New England? The answer centers on Separate-Baptist women's appeal to a higher order of spiritual submission and the egalitarian climate characteristic of the Separate-Baptists early years.

This work focuses on the lives of Elizabeth Tracy Backus (1698-1769) and Susanna Mason Backus (1725-1800). The Backus women mediated the line of spiritual autonomy and cultural subordination in the socio-religious climate of eighteenth-century New England. These two women have been selected for this case study because they represent a single family system that embodied the denominational development from Congregationalist to Separatist to Baptist.

The evidence for this study comes from Isaac Backus' published works, correspondence, and diary. There are two repositories that house the Isaac Backus Papers: Brown University and Yale Divinity School. This thesis examines these sources and others, both primary and secondary, that center around both women's lives.

The thesis begins with a historical overview of eighteenth-century gender norms and the development of the Separatist and Baptist denominations. It then proceeds to describe the ways in which Elizabeth and Susanna's engagement in religious acts are representative of Separate-Baptist women's ability to express their religious freedom while maintaining the broader cultural expectations of women in eighteenth-century New England.

## **Vita**

The author of this work is Jordann Michelle Allan. Born December 21, 1992, in Knoxville, Tennessee to Mark and Michelle Allan. During that time, she received her formal education through the Knox County School System. Upon completion of required studies at Knox Central High School, she entered Carson-Newman University in Jefferson City, Tennessee. From there, she received the Bachelor of Arts with a dual major in Religion and Human Services. After graduating, she entered Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. She has obtained a Masters of Arts in Theology. Upon completion of this work she will receive a Masters of Arts in Church History.

In the process of completing this work, the author got married and can be found under the name Jordann Allan Heckart. She lives in Des Moines, IA with her husband, Jon. She is an adjunct World Religion Professor at Des Moines Area Community College.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A common English idiom is ‘a picture is worth a thousand words;’ however, for a historian of eighteenth-century women, a signature can tell one just as much. Primary documents such as correspondence, legal documents, and journals often stand in for evidence of a life that might otherwise be lost to history. The survival of these artifacts serve as proof of a woman’s literacy. A woman’s ability to write provides evidence of her social class and educational background. Additionally, signatures to church documents serve as guidelines for a woman’s theological views. Finally, personal letters open a window into the intimate conversations of a woman’s life. The artifacts belonging to Elizabeth Tracy Backus (1698-1769) and Susanna Mason Backus (1725-1800) demonstrate the importance of written objects in recovering a life; however, they also reveal the complexity of sources when all that remains of the original sources is a transcription.

The majority of these women’s written works were preserved over time due to their shared relationship with Reverend Isaac Backus (1724-1806); Backus is remembered as a leading eighteenth-century Baptist minister in New England.<sup>1</sup> From the 1740s to the 1790s, his religious pedigree mirrors the progression of many other adherents to his faith—Congregationalist, Separatist, Baptist. In addition, his literary,

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<sup>1</sup> William Pitt and Rady Roldan-Figueroa define the difference between religious toleration and religious liberty or freedom as, “Religious toleration describes a church privileged by law, conceding limited rights to minority or outside groups. Under full religious liberty/religious freedom the state allows full and equal religious opportunity for all of its citizens.” These definitions will be adhered to throughout the present work. William L. Pitts, Jr. and Rady Roldan-Figueroa, eds., *The Collected Works of Hanserd Knollys*, Early English Baptist Texts, eds. Rady Roldan-Figueroa and C. Douglas Weaver, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2017), 29 n. 103.



political, educational, and pastoral efforts in support of the Baptists served to advance the sect of like-minded believers into an organized denomination by the end of the eighteenth century. In Baptist History, Isaac Backus is held up as a champion for religious freedom. The majority of his ministry was devoted to seeking liberation from taxation and persecution for the Baptists. Ironically, Backus' efforts to gain religious freedom resulted in the silencing of women within the tradition.

The lives of Elizabeth and Susanna serve as a case study for the ways in which religious freedom and subordination progressed alongside the cyclical development of eighteenth-century Separatist and Baptist denominations. It will be argued that Elizabeth and Susanna's lives demonstrate the initial expansion in women's roles in a religious community when a new sect is formed and the eventual diminishment of women's roles once the denomination is formally organized. In the case of the Separate-Baptist tradition, this episode of denominational development was initiated by the events of the Awakenings in the 1740s and began to organize through the creation of institutions and associations in the 1760s. By the 1790s the Baptist denomination was solidified and recognized as an established religious group in New England.

Elizabeth and Susanna submitted to societal standards by adhering to their roles as a mother and wife in the home, instead of participating in the workforce. Yet, both women displayed their autonomy within their religious institutions through acts of dissension. Regarding Elizabeth, this thesis will argue that the status of widowhood provided her with a unique platform within the Separatist denomination to exert religious

freedom.<sup>2</sup> Upon separation from the established church, Elizabeth remained a Separatist until her death. Her decision to separate from the Congregational Church of Norwich, Connecticut and her experience in prison serve as examples of the ways in which she asserted her religious freedom. Elizabeth's religious actions serve as evidence for her influence upon her son's, Isaac Backus, religious development. In the case of Susanna, her role as a minister's wife conferred upon her a higher status within her congregations' community, yet she does not appear to abuse this status. All of Susanna's religious actions were carried out alongside other female congregants. Unfortunately, these early years of religious action were short lived. The majority of Susanna's adult life mirror the diminishment of women's roles within an organized denomination.

### Literature Review

The history of Separate-Baptist women in eighteenth-century New England has been grossly understudied.<sup>3</sup> This historical oversight is two-fold, concerning both the

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Beth Norton outlines the civil implications of widowhood in *Liberty's Daughters*. Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Juster's *Disorderly Women*, is the only work I have found that specifically deals with the role of Baptist women in eighteenth-century New England society. Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics & Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994). Janet Moore Lindman and Scott Stephen focus on the role of Baptist women in the South in their respective works: Janet Moore Lindman, *Bodies of Belief: Baptist Community in Early America*, in *Early American Studies*, eds. Kathleen M. Brown, Daniel K. Richter, and David Waldstreicher, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Scott Stephen, *Redeeming the Southern Family: Evangelical Women and Domestic Devotion in the Antebellum South*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008). Other works in Women's History focus on the broader role of women in eighteenth-century New England by examining the Congregational church. Dissenting groups such as Baptists and Methodists are neglected or addressed as periphery groups.

religious and cultural climate in which women inhabited. Since the 1970s there has been a call among select historians to engage in Women's History in order to accurately represent the impact of gender on previous events through change over time.<sup>4</sup>

Subsequently, extensive scholarship has undertaken the challenge to incorporate the broader experience of women into the historical narrative, beyond that of prominent white male figures.<sup>5</sup> In part, this thesis seeks to contribute to the call to recover the lost voices of women.

The two women of interest in this thesis have naturally limited the scope of the project. Their contextualization within the eighteenth-century heightens the question of women's roles in society, in part, due to the events of the Awakenings and the American Revolution.<sup>6</sup> The eighteenth-century is bookended by the initial period of colonial settlement (seventeenth century) and the latter period of National establishment (nineteenth century). Historians are divided over the development of women's roles during these three centuries. The "golden age theory" purports a decline thesis concerning women's roles in the public realm; whereas, the "progressive theory" argues

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<sup>4</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*, Vintage Books Edition, (New York: Vintage Books, 1991); Merril D. Smith, *Women's Roles in Eighteenth-Century America*, *Women's Roles through History*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2010), 1, 9; Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*; Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845*, *Gender and American Culture*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> The title "Awakenings" will be used throughout the thesis, instead of Great Awakening, to designate the numerous revivals that occur in New England in the middle of the eighteenth century in an effort to recognize the plurality and duration of these events.

that women's roles increased.<sup>7</sup> Instead of adhering to one of the two previously proposed linear views, this thesis suggests a cyclical pattern concerning the rise and fall of women's roles in society. The religious impact of denominational development nuances this argument. Due to the interwoven nature of the Congregationalist churches and government at this time, an adherent's religious group impacted broader societal roles in eighteenth-century New England.

Similarly, the lives of Elizabeth and Susanna Backus further delineate the scope of this thesis to the examination of three denominations: Congregationalists, Separatists and Baptists.<sup>8</sup> By engaging with each tradition chronologically, this thesis seeks to demonstrate the similarities and differences between these denominations, while evaluating the relationship of development shared between all three traditions.<sup>9</sup> A pitfall

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<sup>7</sup> There is a two-sided debate within Women's History concerning the shift in the role of women from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century. The initial theory, developed in the 1920s by Elisabeth Anthony Dexter, argues that women experienced greater social freedom in the seventeenth century and early part of the eighteenth century in comparison to their English counterparts; however, following the American Revolution women's roles were sequestered to the private sphere of the home. This view is often called the "golden age" thesis and is supported by scholars such as, Mary P. Ryan, Susan Juster, Carnelia Dayton, Gerda Lerner, and Roger Thompson. In contrast, the "progressive theory" suggests exactly the opposite; instead of women's roles in society declining, they are believed to have increased. It is argued that in the nineteenth century women experienced greater political and legal equality. Historians who adhere to this thesis include: Mary Beth Norton, Lyle Kochler, Carol F. Karlsen, and Christine Heyman. I was introduced to this historical debate by a footnote in Susan Juster's *Disorderly Women*. My understanding of the two-sides of this debate was expanded by Mary Beth Norton's "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America."

<sup>8</sup> Historians concerned with the Congregationalist and Separatist traditions include: Erik R. Seeman, Mark Noll, Harry Stout, and Edmund S. Morgan. On Separatists see C.C. Goen, Thomas S. Kidd, and J. M. Bumsted. On Baptists see H. Leon McBeth, Robert Torbet, O. K. Armstrong, Thomas Kidd, Barry Hankins, and Bill Leonard.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that the author recognizes her personal bias to the Baptist tradition, which she adheres to. Her personal connection to the tradition has served as a catalyst for interest in the historical development of the denomination. The biographical

of denominational history has been the lack of incorporation of women into the broader narrative of American religious history. Due to the nature of this thesis, through the examination of two women's lives, this pitfall of denominational history is being rectified, which previously entailed the singular focus upon prominent white male figures.<sup>10</sup>

Historians have neglected to examine the distinguishing role that gender played in the lives of individuals who desired to separate from the Congregational Church. The Congregational Church of Norwich has served as a case study for the broader context of Congregational churches.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, historians have used the Norwich congregation as an example of the history of the Separatists,<sup>12</sup> patterns of separation,<sup>13</sup> and how Separatist churches addressed paying the religious tax.<sup>14</sup> Although time has been spent documenting the persecution Separatists experienced due to their separation, the particularities of women's experiences of taxation and imprisonment have been ignored.

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nature of this work with its treatment of Congregationalism and Separatism in relation to the Baptist tradition will seek to curb this bias.

<sup>10</sup> Keith Harper, Sean Michael Lucas, and Paul William Harvey et. al., *American Denominational History: Perspectives on the Past, Prospects for the Future*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2008). <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed September 9, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> J.M. Bumsted, "Revivalism and Separatism in New England: The First Society of Norwich, Connecticut, as a Case Study," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (Oct. 1967): 588-612. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1919472>.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas L. Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England*, (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630-1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State*, vol. 1, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>14</sup> McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, 373-375.

This work seeks to rectify this oversight through the detailed exploration of Elizabeth Backus' life.

Isaac Backus serves as an entry point into the lives of his mother Elizabeth and his wife Susanna.<sup>15</sup> His historical prominence creates a foundation upon which to build the historical narrative of two women previously treated as peripheral figures.<sup>16</sup> Due to the preservation of Elizabeth's prison epistle, she has been cited as an example of religious persecution within Separatism.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, Susanna's life has been overshadowed by the status of her husband; nevertheless, she too engaged in religious action. Both women's lives represent the denominational transition of a woman from

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<sup>15</sup> McLoughlin remains the leading historian on Isaac Backus, his works include: *New England Dissent*; Isaac Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, ed. William G. McLoughlin, (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1979); William G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition*, The Library of American Biography, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967); Isaac Backus, *Isaac Backus on Church, State, and Calvinism. Pamphlets, 1754–1789*, ed. William G. McLoughlin, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1968).

<sup>16</sup> Additional works concerning Isaac Backus include: Stanley Grenz, "Isaac Backus and the English Tradition," *Baptist Quarterly* 30, no. 5 (1984): 221-32. doi:10.1080/0005576X.1984.11751649; Grenz, *Isaac Backus—Puritan and Baptist: His Place in History, His Thought, and Their Implications for Modern Baptist Theology*, National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion (NABPR), Dissertation Series no. 4, Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1983); Grenz, and Theological Research Exchange Network, *Isaac Backus and the Baptist Quest for Religious Liberty*. American Society of Church History Papers, Sch-9110. Portland, Or.: Theological Research Exchange Network, 2005 (TREN). doi:10.2986/tren.SCH-9110; Alvah Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times of the Rev. Isaac Backus, A.M.*, (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1859); T.B. Maston, *Isaac Backus: Pioneer of Religious Liberty*, (Rochester, N.Y.: American Baptist Historical Society, 1962). William Backus, *A Genealogical Memoir of the Backus Family*, (Norwich, Conn.: Press of the Bulletin Co., 1889) <https://archive.org/details/genealogicalmemo00back> (accessed 16 August 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Due to her relationship to Isaac, Elizabeth is cited in a source concerning Baptists, although she never held to believer's baptism. William Cathcard D.D., ed., *The Baptist Encyclopedia: A Dictionary of the Doctrines, Ordinances, Usages, Confessions of Faith, Sufferings, Labors, and Successes, and of the General History of the Baptist Denomination in All Lands*, (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1881), 52.

Congregationalist to Separatist to Baptist.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, this narrative supports previous scholarship's presentation of eighteenth-century New England household and familial duties.<sup>19</sup> This thesis seeks to provide an overview of Elizabeth Tracy Backus and Susanna Mason Backus' lives in order to introduce a feminine perspective to the predominantly masculine accounts of eighteenth-century religious freedom.

### **Thesis Overview**

The general argument of the thesis has been set forward in chapter one. Chapter two examines the gender norms of eighteenth-century New England in order to provide context for the gendered implications of denominational development on the lives of men and women. Additionally, a historical overview concerning the initial separation within the Congregational Church, the formation of Separatist churches, and these churches development into the Baptist denomination will be provided in chapter two. This will lay the foundation for a comparative study of women's religious actions as either in keeping with or in opposition to cultural expectations.

Subsequently, chapter three will analyze the impact of Elizabeth Backus' religious community on her religious actions by use of a biographical overview. Specifically, Elizabeth exercised her religious freedom in her initial conversion, spiritual awakening, separation from the Congregational church, refusal to pay the ecclesial tax,

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<sup>18</sup> When Susanna is addressed in secondary sources it is always in relation to Isaac. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 45-46; Leonard I. Sweet, *The Minister's Wife: Her Role in Nineteenth-Century American Evangelicalism*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 19.

<sup>19</sup> Ulrich, *Good Wives*; Smith, *Women's Roles in Eighteenth-Century America*, 1, 9.

and imprisonment. Her life demonstrates the impact of the early period of denominational development on an adherent's life, from Congregationalist to Separatist.

In a similar manner, chapter four will continue the narrative of denominational development and the exercising of religious freedom through an examination of the life of Susanna Backus. The denominational growth during this time encompassed the period of early formation for the Separatist and Baptist traditions, and concluded with the official establishment of the Baptist denomination. By examining Susanna's experience within the Separate-Baptist denomination, one can observe the correlating trend of expansion and suppression of women's religious involvement. Finally, chapter five will draw the thesis to a close through a comparison of Elizabeth and Susanna's lives.



## CHAPTER TWO: THE RELIGIOUS CLIMATE OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NEW ENGLAND

### Gender

Cultural expectations concerning gender norms have a direct impact on the lives of men and women. In the case of Elizabeth and Susanna the shifting gender norms—from the seventeenth century to the eighteenth century—in tandem with developing religious sects, altered the potential for female agency. Until the nineteenth century, gender was mostly perceived according to a one-sex model, in which the male sex was understood to be the true sex: strong and ideal. Women, on the other hand, were viewed as an incomplete and weaker version of the same sex.<sup>20</sup> This perception of sex reinforced the view that women were subordinate to men. Female subordination manifested itself in the form of activities, public matters, politics, and relationships; furthermore, the seventeenth-century Puritan biblical interpretation of Eve as a seductive temptress served to underscore the one-sex model. Although the one-sex model would endure throughout the eighteenth century, a transition occurred within the religious climate of New England. Instead of emphasizing women's subordination and weakness, "ministers relied in part upon a conviction that women were somehow more religious and had an inherent sense of rectitude."<sup>21</sup> This in part was due to the fact that, from 1690-1740, women made up the

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Laquer, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) as cited in Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 14.

<sup>21</sup> Lonna M. Malmsheimer, "Daughters of Zion: New England Roots of American Feminism," *The New England Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (Sep. 1977), 503.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/364280>.

majority of congregants in Congregational churches.<sup>22</sup> The shift in the religious perception of women resulted in a new construction of the ideal woman, who became known as the Virtuous Woman. Other women attempted to emulate this spiritual model. The Virtuous Woman sought God early, prayed and fasted, loved to go to church, read, conversed, wrote, managed well, and submitted to the will of God.<sup>23</sup>

Although the religious perception of women changed, the social status of women as subordinate was maintained through legal codes and the patriarchal government of the household. Upon marriage, a woman's name and legal status changed. Prior to wedding, a woman was dependent on her father; following marriage, her dependency was transferred to her husband.<sup>24</sup> As a *feme covert*, women were legally "one with their husbands, and so they could not sue or be sued, draft wills, make contracts, or buy and sell property." At the same time, "women had a right to dower in their husband's estates, guaranteeing them a life interest in approximately one-third of the family property at his death."<sup>25</sup> These legal statutes demonstrated the economic status that women received upon marriage. It was understood that they were put in place to protect women from their perceived weaker abilities, but in doing so, they served a greater religiopolitical purpose by maintaining female subordination.

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<sup>22</sup> Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 215-6; Juster, *Disorderly Women*, 127; Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light*: Table 1, 94-5.

<sup>23</sup> Ulrich identifies and expands upon each of the above characteristics of a Virtuous Woman in "Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (Spring, 1976): 20-40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712475>; Gerald F. Moran, "'Sisters' in Christ: Women and the Church in Seventeenth-Century New England," in Janet James, *Women in American Religion*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1980).

<sup>24</sup> Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 27.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, *Women's Roles in Eighteenth-Century America*, 1, 9; Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 46.

Under the governance of her husband, a woman's two main responsibilities in the family system included childrearing and the maintenance of the home. A woman was expected to be pregnant within the first year of her marriage. During her fertile years, she might give birth nine to twelve times. This emphasis on childbearing came at a cost; eighteenth-century women endured a greater deal of anxiety at childbirth due to the increased risk of miscarriages and maternal death.<sup>26</sup> Beyond the childrearing expectations, a wife managed the majority of the household duties. These duties included washing, ironing, baking, sewing, farming, gardening, food preparation, and a host of other responsibilities depending upon the class status of the family. In contrast, the husband maintained the finances of the home and managed the property.<sup>27</sup> No matter the degree of autonomy a woman exercised in her maintenance of the home, she remained subordinate to her husband as the head of the household.<sup>28</sup>

Due to women's cultural subjugation, they could not obtain power in the public domain; however, the onslaught of revivalism in the mid-eighteenth century served as a source of informal power for women. The development of New Light congregations, through Separatism, provided women with a social context in which they could operate as active participants, instead of passive onlookers.<sup>29</sup> Scholars have identified the impact of a female majority in church membership as a contributing factor to the shift in gender

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<sup>26</sup> Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 129; Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 71; Smith, *Women's Roles in Eighteenth-Century America*, 10-11.

<sup>27</sup> Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 12-22.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>29</sup> Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 27

roles, and these gendered changes worked themselves out in Separatist and Baptist churches.<sup>30</sup>

Another effect of revivalism on New England culture entailed the rise of individualism. Women would not be the only group to find the desire of life and liberty unequally applied to them, but they found many of the assumptions of the old world eroding in their new Separatist churches. An example of this new individualism's impact on women is the emphasis placed on the profession of one's conversion experience, which provided women with a formal outlet to publicly express their faith.<sup>31</sup>

### **Denominational Development**

The development of new denominations is one factor that impacted the transition of gender roles during the last half of the eighteenth century in New England. The theory of "institutional maturation," suggests that during the early organization of a religious group, as a sect, women maintain a greater degree of religious freedom.<sup>32</sup> As the religious group developed into an established denomination, through the construction of formal institutions, women's religious freedom declined. An overview of this theory of denominational development within the Separate-Baptist traditions entails three parts: a two-fold origin, Separate-Baptist egalitarianism, and Baptist institutionalization.

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<sup>30</sup> Juster, *Disorderly Women*, 41, 127; Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 216; Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 50.

<sup>31</sup> Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 44-45.

<sup>32</sup> Juster, *Disorderly Women*, 132.

## *A Two-fold Origin: Baptists*

Colonial Baptists and Congregationalists share the same point of origin in the English Reformation. King Henry VIII sanctioned the first Act of Supremacy and established the Church of England in 1534. Due to the influences of the Continental Reformation, some people did not believe the Church of England had sufficiently diverged from the Catholic Church. Two groups who held this opinion included the Puritans and Separatists.<sup>33</sup> Most Puritans sought to remain in the Church of England while seeking to purify it from within. In contrast, the Separatists saw no hope for reforming the Church of England, and therefore sought to separate themselves from the church. These Separatists then established their own congregations based upon principles of freedom from English control and congregational polity.<sup>34</sup> As England's reigning monarchs differed on their views of appropriate religious reform, the dissenting groups faced a great deal of oppression for nearly two centuries.

In the history of the Baptist faith, a consistent progression emerged concerning the development of various Baptist groups: The earliest individuals began as members of

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<sup>33</sup> Some scholars identify Separatists and Puritans as two emphases within a single group, not as two distinct groups.

<sup>34</sup> On Baptist origins, see Thomas Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists: From the Reformation to the Beginning of the Reign of King George I*, 4 vol., (Lafayette, T.N.: Church History and Research Archives, 1978); H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987); Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, 3rd ed., (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2000); B.R. White, "Baptist Beginnings and the Kiffin Manuscript," *Baptist History and Heritage* 1 (January 1967): 27-37, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials PLUS*, EBSCOhost (accessed August 6, 2018); Williston Walker and Champlin Burrage, "The Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research, 1550-1641," *The American Historical Review* 18, no. 1 (1912): 126. doi:10.2307/1832703; William Lumpkin, *Baptist Confession of Faith*, (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1959); Roger Hayden, *English Baptist History and Heritage*, (United Kingdom: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1990).

the Church of England, followed by many then separating to form their own congregations. Finally, upon personal examination of scripture, congregational leaders progressed further away from the established church and founded Baptist communities. Upon adhering to believer's baptism, these newfound Baptists then sought to distinguish themselves from the perception of Anabaptist radicalism, which also held to believer's baptism. This same pattern occurred in New England within the Congregational Church.

In England two major sects of Baptists developed: The General Baptists and the Particular Baptists. The former was founded by John Smyth and Thomas Helwys by 1611. These Baptists held to the Arminian view of unlimited atonement, whereas the latter held to the Calvinist belief in particular atonement and developed out of the Jacob, Lathrop and Jessey Church by 1638.<sup>35</sup> At the same time that these sects were forming, other individuals with Baptist beliefs migrated to the New World to escape the English Civil War.

The first successful New England colony was established in 1620 at Plymouth, Massachusetts. English Puritans migrated to the region due to religious persecution by the Church of England under the reign of King James I. A decade later, the Massachusetts Bay Colony was established in 1630 by the Massachusetts Bay Company.<sup>36</sup> It was during this time that English Puritans established the Congregational Church of Massachusetts. Upon establishment, the Puritan government required a federal

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<sup>35</sup> The early history of the Particular Baptists is tenuous and consists of a number of contributing figures. This Separatist congregation named after its three earliest pastors, Jacob, Lathrop, and Jessey, is commonly referred to as the JLJ Church. Various factions from this congregation served to establish the Particular Baptists. "Kiffin Manuscript," in *A Sourcebook for Baptists Heritage*, ed. H. Leon McBeth, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 26-27.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas S. Kidd, *American Colonial History: Clashing Cultures and Faiths*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 87.

tax upon the people to be given to the Congregational Church. In turn, if individuals dissented from the established church they would face persecution by means of property confiscation, physical violence, and imprisonment. Despite Baptists' hope for increased religious freedom by fleeing England, they were met with an alternative form of persecution after their arrival in New England. Concerning early Baptist activity in New England, Thomas Kidd identifies religious persecution as both a declining factor and a catalyst within the Baptist faith. This persecution hindered the growth of the Baptists, yet it also provided them with a passion for the Baptist commitments.<sup>37</sup>

In New England, the earliest Baptist church is traced back to the Congregationalist Roger Williams. Williams fled to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1631, in order to escape the persecution of Archbishop Laud. He was exiled from Massachusetts within five years due to his pleas for religious liberty. In turn, he founded the Rhode Island Colony, which provided religious liberty. Williams capitalized on the discussion of church and state, and became its main champion during these years. In 1639, Williams joined the small congregation of Baptists who migrated to Rhode Island. That same year, the First Baptist Church of Providence was founded. Williams, did not remain a Baptist for long; within a few months of his Baptism, he sought membership with the Seekers.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, Williams served as a facilitator for the Baptist faith in America through his provision of a Colony in which the Baptists could establish themselves.

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins, *Baptists in America: A History*, (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2015), 35.

<sup>38</sup> Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, 201-202.

In 1691, the oppressive atmosphere in New England shifted to meet the requirement of the Massachusetts government to align its laws with the English Act of Toleration of 1689.<sup>39</sup> Despite this action, by 1700, there were only ten Baptist churches in New England with less than three hundred members. For Baptists, the eighteenth century entailed a large number of vacillating laws which at times lessened the burden of religious persecution while at other times increased the consequences of dissension. The Baptist tradition did not experience a growth in adherents until the mid-century events of the New England Awakenings.

Individuals who supported the Awakenings of the 1740s were referred to as “New Lights,” due to their belief in individual inspiration and enlightenment through the Holy Spirit, whereas the term “Old Light” was applied to individuals who were against the revivals. In New England, revivals tended to be Calvinistic in doctrine and marked by experiential religion.<sup>40</sup> Revivals created division within the Baptist, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian churches of New England. In the case of the Baptists, those who supported the revivals were known as New Baptists, while those who were against the revivals were known as Old or Regular Baptists. The experience of these Baptists represents one of the two-fold origin paths that produced Separate-Baptists.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 201-208.

<sup>40</sup> Torbet defines experiential religion as “the preaching of conversion” which brought about “a deep consciousness of sin” and anxiety concerning salvation within an individual. This led to “emotional excitement,” an expressive characteristic that had been absent from the current church membership. Identifying traits of this new experienced religion included weeping, “holy laughter,” ecstasy of joy, dancing, and loss of bodily control. Ibid., 222.



## *A Two-fold Origin: Separatists*

The second aspect of the Separate-Baptists to emerge during this time was the Separatist branch. The Congregational Church of New England experienced a series of *separations* instigated by the enthusiastic revivalism of the Awakenings. These Separatists based their own congregations on New Light principles. Contrary to previous scholarship, the Separatists did not exclusively represent the lower classes; they drew from “respectable, middle class churchgoers,” including church deacons.<sup>41</sup> Scholars have identified “approximately 125 Separate churches were established throughout New England and in the border regions of New York” during the Separatist movement from 1740-1770, “The greatest concentrations of these Separatist churches were in eastern Connecticut and southeastern Massachusetts.”<sup>42</sup> These pro-revival factions separated from the established church on two grounds. First, they separated based on their desire to preserve a congregational polity by adhering to the Cambridge Platform, which maintained that “all the power of church government was in each church as a body.”<sup>43</sup> This appeal was placed over and against the shifting emphasis within Congregational churches to adopt a centralized form of church government, as outlined in the later Saybrook Platform.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, 347.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>43</sup> Isaac Backus, *Gospel Comfort for mourners: a sermon, delivered at Middleborough, February 5, 1769, upon hearing of the death of a godly mother; to which is added, some memoirs of her life. With a short account of his wife*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Manning & Loring: Boston, 1803), 22-23.

<sup>44</sup> Williston Walker, ed., *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1893).

A second ground for separation was the Separatists' belief, "that at all times the doors of the church should be carefully kept against such as cannot give a satisfactory evidence of the work of God upon their souls."<sup>45</sup> This was mediated through the oral recitation of one's conversion experience. Historians such as Edmund Morgan and William McLoughlin identified this practice as taking root in early Puritan churches during the mid-1630s "to help assure a church of 'visible saints.'"<sup>46</sup> Francis Bremer tempers this widely held historical view by differentiating between the various geographical locations of churches in New England—Massachusetts, New Haven, and Hartford. Bremer's research reveals the discontinuity among these early Puritan churches concerning the requirement of professing one's conversion narrative upon membership.<sup>47</sup> The disunity among Congregational churches underscores the reason for the Separatists' desire to mandate a public testimony of one's conversion.

In addition to subverting congregational polity and negligence concerning conversion, the Separatists also included the following in their reasons for separation: the lack of enforced church discipline; certain doctrines that were not properly held, such as, "the nature of conversion and of the soul's walk with God, the teaching of the Divine Spirit and the substance of experimental religion"; events that were evidently from God were proclaimed to be otherwise, such as the effects of the Awakenings; and lastly, the

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<sup>45</sup> Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times*, 45.

<sup>46</sup> Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 1:98, n.1. On conversion narratives see Edmund Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of A Puritan Idea*, (Edmund Sears, 1965), 90-96.

<sup>47</sup> Francis J. Bremer, "To Tell What God Hath Done for They Soul": Puritan Spiritual Testimonies as Admission Tests and Means of Edification," *The New England Quarterly* LXXXVII, no. 4, (December 2014), doi:10.1162/TNEQ a 00416.

prevention of uneducated men from preaching in the church.<sup>48</sup> In tandem with the Separatists' declaration of their reasons for separating, the act of separating entailed the removal of a select group of like-minded individuals who then organized themselves into a new church. Typically, a dissenting congregation would begin by meeting in the home of a Separatist member. A pastor was then called from within the group, due to the small size of the Separatists and the lack of pre-existing ministers.

Despite the Separatists' attempt to establish their own churches, legally they were bound to the Congregational Church. In Connecticut, the legislature required all residents to pay an ecclesial tax, which supported the established minister of each town. Refusal to pay the tax resulted in public harassment, seizure of land, and imprisonment. Prior to separation, the Separatists did not object to the ecclesial tax while they were members of the established church. In fact, they did not identify the ecclesial tax as a reason for their separation. It was only after the Separatists endured persecution to a greater degree than the other dissenting groups—Baptists, Quakers, and Anglicans—and were forced to pay a tax to the minister they no longer supported that the Separatists adopted the idea of voluntarism.<sup>49</sup> McLoughlin thus identifies the lack of religious toleration extended to the Separatists as due, in part, to their large numbers and the direct threat they posed to the established order.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times*, 43.

<sup>49</sup> Voluntarism is the ideal that congregants should pay their minister on a voluntary basis, instead of by taxation.

<sup>50</sup> McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, 360, 366-367.

### *Separate-Baptist Egalitarianism*

In the midst of such persecution, the Separatists demonstrated a unique form of egalitarianism between their male and female congregants through the equal sharing of elements in church governance.<sup>51</sup> Upon the formation of Separatist churches, the subsequent period of egalitarian church governance endured for just over a decade. The population of Separatists soon peaked in 1754, with the establishment of over one hundred congregations.<sup>52</sup> McLoughlin identifies 1754, as the dividing year in which Separatists evaluated their views on church membership, which led them to take into account their understanding of baptism. This led many to reject infant baptism in favor of believer's baptism by immersion, which reinforced their ideal of the visible church. As a result, the Separatists quickly dwindled in number because the majority of Separatist congregations adopted Baptist principles. After making this theological transition, these individuals became known as the Separate-Baptists. The remaining Separatist congregations who held to infant baptism continued to dwindle until 1775. Many Separatists returned to their previous Congregational churches. The Separate-Baptist tradition endured for another decade before formalization ensued.

This time frame, 1745 to 1764, encompasses the height of women's involvement in Separate-Baptist religious action. Women, in contrast to their silent presence in the Congregational Church, took on active roles within their respective Separate-Baptist congregations. Their voices were heard and affirmed through the required oral recitation

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<sup>51</sup> Juster, *Disorderly Women*, 3-4; Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 61.

<sup>52</sup> McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, 346 n. 14; McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 203.

of their conversion experience. Women increasingly participated in church meetings and voted on church matters. In society, women did not have a public voice and were not able to vote, but within Separate-Baptist churches women obtained this right. Women played an active role in the election of their ministers and deacons. They participated in church meetings during which issues of church discipline were determined. Finally, women were involved in the decision making process concerning church worship.<sup>53</sup>

### *The Institutionalization of Baptists*

The period of institutionalization began in 1763, due to the influence of Baptists from the Philadelphia Association. Baptist leaders, such as, James Manning and Morgan Edwards came alongside the New England Baptists first to partner with them in the founding of Rhode Island College in 1764, and then to establish the Warren Association of New England.<sup>54</sup> Through the establishment of a non-sectarian institution for higher education Baptist ministers, along with other dissenters, could obtain a college education. This step towards formalized education sought to remove the intellectualism present within established churches towards dissenting groups. In large part, what allowed the Baptists to establish the college was the growth the tradition had experienced. Ezra Stiles estimated that “in 1760 there were 22,000 Baptists in New England and eighty percent of them lived in Rhode Island.”<sup>55</sup> Additionally, locating the college in Rhode Island—a

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<sup>53</sup> Juster, *Disorderly Women*, 41, 125; Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 33.

<sup>54</sup> Rhode Island College became Brown University in 1804.

<sup>55</sup> Ezra Stiles, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, ed. F. B. Dexter, 3 vols., (New York, 1901), I, 397 as cited in McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, 492.

colony without a college and founded upon religious freedom—removed a number of obstacles.

Subsequently, in 1767, the Warren Association was established.<sup>56</sup> McLoughlin identifies three reasons why James Manning desired to establish a Baptist association in New England that mirrored the Philadelphia Association he came from. The first reason served to benefit the Rhode Island College by removing certain Baptists' anti-educational views. Second, Manning wanted to see the Baptists of New England united under common leadership, this desire in turn would serve to bolster the third reason. By gathering the Baptists of New England under one banner, Manning believed they could collectively fight the persecution they were experiencing from the established order.<sup>57</sup> Due to unabated fears from these Baptists' separatist pasts—surrounding the centralized polity of associations as outlined in the Saybrook Platform—a couple years of apprehension delayed the growth of the Warren Association. After much negotiation, the Association grew from an original membership of four churches in 1767 to thirty-eight churches in 1780.<sup>58</sup>

The precursory events leading up to the Revolutionary War, 1775-1783, drew the newly formed denominations' attention toward political endeavors. Throughout the history of the Separate-Baptists, individual congregations struggled for religious freedom by seeking exemption from taxation to the established church. These legal and political issues would not be addressed collectively by a united Baptist front until the organization of the Grievance Committee within the Warren Association. Subsequently, members of

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<sup>56</sup> Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times*, 153-155.

<sup>57</sup> McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, 503.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 508.

the Committee, leading Baptist figures, and Quakers attended the first Continental Congress in 1774 to discuss their plight, concerning religious taxation, with the magistrates of Massachusetts.<sup>59</sup> By this point the local congregations of Baptists that were formed in the 1740s and 1750s were predominantly settled in ecclesial matters and could turn their attention outwards. It was this shift toward political affairs that silenced the voices of Baptist women.

Although the tradition was formalizing into a denomination through these events, women played little to no part in these institutionalizing endeavors. By the 1770's women were not mentioned in accounts of institutional development. After the initial establishment of a new Baptist congregation, during which time women played active roles in their congregations, these same churches turned their attention towards areas of society, such as, education and politics, in which women were not welcomed. In the Baptist tradition, Juster identifies the 1790s as the point when the institutionalization of the sect into a denomination solidified.<sup>60</sup> At this point, women were no longer participating in religious matters to the same degree or in the same way they had four decades earlier. When looking at the denominational level, one can see the cyclical development of women's religious action from 1740 to 1790.

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<sup>59</sup> Backus, "Account of Journeys Sep. 26—Oct 14, 1774," Isaac Backus Papers, (RG 280), Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library. Box 2.

<sup>60</sup> Juster, *Disorderly Women*, 112.

### CHAPTER THREE: ELIZABETH TRACY BACKUS—MOTHER OF ISRAEL

Isaac Backus bestowed upon his mother the title of “mother in our Israel” while reflecting upon her life.<sup>61</sup> In the eighteenth century, this phrase was a term of honor used by Protestants to identify “older women who had been long and faithful pillars of the church...they had helped to spread the Christian faith through their nurture of the family of God.”<sup>62</sup> Isaac’s invocation of this ideal to describe his mother demonstrates the impact Elizabeth had on the Separatist community of Norwich, Connecticut and the influence she exerted over Isaac’s religious development.

Elizabeth asserted her religious freedom in five particular ways: her initial conversion, subsequent spiritual awakening, separation from the Congregational church, refusal to pay the ecclesial tax, and imprisonment. In these same instances, one can observe the ways in which Elizabeth’s religious experiences mirror the broader denominational development of the Separatist tradition. By evaluating Elizabeth’s life chronologically, the interplay of autonomy and subordination can be identified. Elizabeth demonstrated autonomy in her religious actions because she understood herself to be spiritually subordinate to the will of God. While Elizabeth’s religious actions appear as dissension to the established church, she understood them to be demonstrations of her faithfulness to God in spite of religious norms of the time.

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<sup>61</sup> Backus, *Gospel Comfort*, 37.

<sup>62</sup> Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 151.



## *Family Heritage*

In order to grasp the significance of Elizabeth's actions of dissent one must understand the context of her life. Elizabeth's lineage directly connected her to several of the more prominent families in Connecticut. An individual's family name contributed greatly to their social status in eighteenth-century New England. Elizabeth's paternal great-grandfather, Lt. Thomas Tracy, was one of the early settlers in Norwich, Connecticut.<sup>63</sup> His son, John Tracy Sr., married into the Winslow family.<sup>64</sup> John's wife, Mary, was the daughter of Josiah Winslow, who was the brother of Governor Edward Winslow, one of the first settlers of Plymouth Colony.<sup>65</sup> In addition, Elizabeth's maternal great-grandfather, Lt. Thomas Leffingwell Sr., was one of the founders of Norwich in 1659. He and Lt. Thomas Tracy were granted four hundred acres of land in 1667, to divide among themselves;<sup>66</sup> both men went on to obtain additional land in Norwich and established themselves as prominent figures within the community.

Elizabeth Tracy (Backus) was born on April 6, 1698 to Elizabeth Leffingwell, the daughter of Sgt. Thomas Jr. Leffingwell, and John Tracy Jr., the son of John Tracy Sr. As

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<sup>63</sup> In England the city of Norwich is pronounced "Nor-ridge." In America the city with the same name is pronounced "Nor-witch." It is not clear as to when this change occurred historically.

<sup>64</sup> Matilda Ormond (Taylor) Birchard Abbey, *Genealogy of the Family of Lt. Thomas Tracy, of Norwich, Conn.* (Milwaukee, Wis.: D. S. Harkness & Co. Printers, 1888), 36-37.

<sup>65</sup> Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times*, 31; Abbey, *Genealogy of the Family of Lt. Thomas Tracy, of Norwich, Conn.*, 37; Frances Manwaring Caulkins, *History of Norwich, Connecticut: From its Possession by the Indians to the Year 1866*, (Published by Friends of the Author, 1874), 204.

<sup>66</sup> Albert Tracy Leffingwell and Charles Wesley Leffingwell, *1637-1897: The Leffingwell Record. A genealogy of the descendants of Lieut. Thomas Leffingwell, one of the founders of Norwich, Conn.*, (Aurora, N.Y.: Leffingwell Pub. Co., 1897), 17, 21.

a father, John Tracy Jr., is described as a man of “vital and practical religion.”<sup>67</sup> He raised his children in the Puritan tradition and placed a priority on religious education. Aside from this fact, nothing is known concerning Elizabeth’s childhood.

The financial standing of Elizabeth’s maternal and paternal families provided Elizabeth with a high status in the Norwich community, although due to her gender, she could not inherit any significant portion of the wealth. These external factors, the family Elizabeth received and her gender, contributed to her experience of autonomy and subordination. This is an example of a more generalized phenomenon.

Subsequent sources concerning Elizabeth’s life begin with her marriage to Samuel Backus on January 18, 1716. Three months after their marriage, Elizabeth and Samuel were pregnant with their first child; one year after their marriage, their son and namesake, Samuel, was born. Elizabeth and Samuel Sr., went on to have eleven children in total, four girls and seven boys.

### *The Congregational Church of Norwich*

The first instance of Elizabeth exercising religious freedom occurred in 1721, concerning her conversion. Elizabeth and Samuel began attending the first church of Norwich in 1718 as halfway covenant members. The church was established upon the

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<sup>67</sup> Backus, *Gospel Comfort*, 19. This work was written by Isaac following the death of his mother in 1769. It includes the sermon he preached from 1 Thessalonians 4:14, on the Sunday of her death. Appended to the work is a description of Elizabeth’s life and spirituality. Isaac also includes nineteen of Elizabeth’s letters to himself from 1747 to 1765. Isaac concludes the work with a brief address to the reader concerning the sincerity of his mother’s faith. A second edition was published in 1803, three years after the death of Isaac’s wife Susanna. Isaac appended to this edition “A Short Account of Mrs. Susanna Backus.” This appendix contains a spiritual biography of Susanna and fourteen excerpts from her journal concerning the years 1757 to 1759.

Cambridge Platform at the time of the town of Norwich's founding in 1659.<sup>68</sup> This early Puritan congregation would later develop into the established Congregational Church of Norwich. By November 1717, Benjamin Lord, the third minister, was appointed to and ordained by the Norwich Church. He served as the congregation's pastor until his death in 1784, a total of sixty-seven years.<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth became a full member of the church upon her conversion at the age of twenty-three. Two years later, on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1723/4, Elizabeth and Samuel gave birth to their fourth child and second son; he was named Isaac after Elizabeth's youngest brother.<sup>70</sup>

Elizabeth wrote down the events of her conversion experience in the spring of 1725. Isaac later published this piece in *Gospel Comfort for Mourners*. Elizabeth begins her account with the following supplication, "By afflictions of late I have been awakened to see I have been asleep, and I desire to be humbled for my sin, and do desire the Lord would go on still to awaken me, and give me a humble, meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price."<sup>71</sup> Catherine Brekus has classified women's conversion narratives as containing more "passive and submissive language" in comparison to men's use of active language to describe their personal sinfulness and salvation.<sup>72</sup> Elizabeth's conversion narrative aligns with Brekus' observation. Elizabeth uses the passive voice to describe something external to her as being the cause of her realization of her need for salvation. After this, Elizabeth examines her inward lethargy towards God, which is

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<sup>68</sup> Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, 195.

<sup>69</sup> Bumsted, "Revivalism and Separatism in New England," 590.

<sup>70</sup> Abbey, *Genealogy of the Family of Lt. Thomas Tracy*, 37.

<sup>71</sup> Backus, *Gospel Comfort*, 19.

<sup>72</sup> Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 39.

expressed through the terms “afflictions,” “awakened,” “asleep” and “sin.” She does not remain in this introspective state, but directs her gaze towards God. This transition from an internal identification of sin to an external desire for salvation serves as a model for the type of religious autonomy Elizabeth displayed. Through spiritual submission to God’s will, Elizabeth claims religious autonomy in society. She understood herself as operating within God’s will; therefore, her subsequent religious actions, though viewed as in contradiction to the Congregational Church, were not in opposition to God.

Notably, Elizabeth’s experience of conversion occurred separately from her husband. Samuel would not convert and join the church as a full member until 1736, fifteen years later.<sup>73</sup> Ulrich notes that “church membership was one of the few public distinctions available to women...A woman could be admitted to the Table of the Lord regardless of the status, economic position, or religious proclivities of her husband.”<sup>74</sup> Concerning this phenomenon, Douglas Winiarski states, “Women in Norwich and Hampton were close to three times more likely to be the only spouse affiliated with the church at the time a family first appeared at the baptismal basin.”<sup>75</sup> Winiarski’s statistics underscore the prevalence of this occurrence.

Two decades after Elizabeth’s conversion, a major life event would take place which would eventually serve as a catalyst for Elizabeth’s second display of religious freedom—her spiritual awakening. On November 24<sup>th</sup> 1740 Samuel Backus died of measles, merely a month after the birth of their final child, John. Upon his death, Samuel

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<sup>73</sup> Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times*, 26.

<sup>74</sup> Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 216.

<sup>75</sup> Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light*, 108.

Sr. was the third richest man in Norwich with an estate valued at £7,000.<sup>76</sup> Due to Elizabeth's legal status as a *feme covert*, she inherited one-third of Samuel's estate. These circumstances preserved Elizabeth's financial status as one of the wealthiest women in Norwich. The remaining property and monetary goods were distributed among the Backus' sons. Samuel Backus' death meant that at the age of forty-two, Elizabeth was a widow with eleven children between the ages of twenty-three and five weeks old. The labors of childbirth combined with the grief of her husband's death plunged Elizabeth into a period of deep depression.<sup>77</sup> She was in such a weak state that she did not attend church until the summer of 1741. These events set Elizabeth up for a new phase in perusing religious autonomy.

In the midst of her depression, Elizabeth's theological framework allowed her to interpret the death of her husband in accordance with the will of God. Often in the Puritan tradition, events were interpreted through the lens of God's providence, which ranged from instances of war to the death of a loved one. Life was understood to be precious, and for a time, a gift from God. Upon reflecting on her circumstances months later, Elizabeth wrote,

it pleased God to afflict me in taking away my husband. And now in this time of distress I saw so much of the evil and wickedness of my own heart, that I thought God was justly afflicting of me: I saw I had been asleep.—As I was walking in my house in great heaviness, these words were cast into my mind: *In the world ye shall have tribulation.*<sup>78</sup>

In identifying God as her afflicter, Elizabeth was not condemning God, but ascribing to him the almighty power of giving and taking life. Elizabeth then looked inwardly upon

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<sup>76</sup> Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 1:xvi. No record of a Will could be found concerning Samuel Backus.

<sup>77</sup> Grenz, *Isaac Backus—Puritan and Baptist*, 64; McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition*, 9.

<sup>78</sup> Backus, *Gospel Comfort*, 20-1.

herself and examined the wicked state of her own heart. Puritans ascribed to a rigid belief in original sin, which led them to view every human's condition as consumed by sin. Despite Elizabeth's conversion, she interpreted her present circumstances as a consequence of her sinful nature. She employed the same language of "afflicting" and "asleep" as she used in her 1725 letter.<sup>79</sup> Instead of earnestly seeking after the will of God, she had allowed worldly matters to consume her life. Due to her theology, Elizabeth was able to conclude that "God was justly afflicting of me." She believed God had the right to, and did, cause her such pain because of the way in which she had been living her life.

In addition to Elizabeth's theological framework helping her through her depression, her Biblical literacy—another Puritan trait—helped her persist through the stages of grief and suffering. Upon reflecting on her afflicted state, Elizabeth recalled the passage of John 16:33. She sought solace in the scriptures to explain her circumstances. As Elizabeth continued to consider her new circumstances, she described herself as becoming discontent; however, her Puritan inclinations led her to consider the mandate of the tenth commandment not to covet. Elizabeth concluded that she must find contentment in all of life's circumstances, and eventually she was able to "bless God's name for his goodness to me." Following these events, Elizabeth began to "hunger and thirst after the Word, it is the delight of my soul."<sup>80</sup> Elizabeth's personal knowledge of, and encounter with, the Word of God through scripture sustained her during her darkest hour. Through

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 21.

this experience, Elizabeth modeled for her children the power of God to turn sorrow into joy.<sup>81</sup>

### *1741 Awakenings*

Elizabeth's second major act of exercising religious freedom occurred within the context of the 1741 Awakenings. The events of the Awakenings served as a catalyst for upheaval in New England, as they were a precursor to the Separatist movement. The impact of the revivals on the development of the Separatists can be examined through Elizabeth's experience. In the Congregational Church of Norwich, Reverend Lord's early pastorate mirrored the experience of many other congregational ministers in New England, due to his participation in local revivals during the 1720s and 1730s. Rev. Lord and the Norwich congregation continued to support the Awakenings until the mid-1740s. In the summer of 1741, Elizabeth embarked on a spiritual awakening upon hearing the revivalist preaching of James Davenport. In the beginning of August, Rev. Lord invited Davenport to preach in the area alongside Mr. Eleazer Wheelock and Mr. Benjamin Pomeroy. They held a three-day revival that included continuous preaching. Isaac describes the event as entailing "[powerful] preaching, and the sight of many in distress or joy."<sup>82</sup> Many souls were converted during this time of revival, including Isaac Backus.

In the midst of Elizabeth's spiritual awakening, the title of widowhood demonstrates the tension present in relationship to her religious autonomy and societal structures. In

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<sup>81</sup> Jeremiah 31:13 (ESV).

<sup>82</sup> Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times*, 38; Backus, *A History of New-England: With Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians Called Baptists*, ed. David Weston, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 2, (Newton, MA: The Backus Historical Society, 1871), 41.

sources, Elizabeth is referred to as “the Widow.” An example of this can be found in Isaac’s description of Elizabeth’s new found hope following the revivals of 1741. Isaac associates his mother with the widow in Psalm 68, in which God is described as “A father of the fatherless, a judge of the widows.”<sup>83</sup> This title underscores the subordinate nature of Elizabeth’s relationship to her husband. Conversely, the status of widowhood provided Elizabeth with a unique platform within the Separatist denomination to exhort religious freedom. She could make her own decisions without deferring to her husband, simultaneously, maintaining deference to other male figures in society.

The loss of her husband coupled with the events of the 1741 Awakenings created an environment through which Elizabeth expressed a new form of individualism not available to all women. Following the transformational event of the revival on Elizabeth’s life, she became “a fervent revival enthusiast, opening her home for meetings, prayer and exhortation.”<sup>84</sup> During Isaac’s trips to Norwich, Elizabeth’s home served as a meeting place in which Isaac would preach to the people, including his eighty-two-year-old Grandmother Backus.<sup>85</sup> Through the act of opening up her home to dissenting preachers Elizabeth placed herself in opposition to the established church; She was an accomplice to the dissenters. Additionally, Elizabeth’s actions served as an effort to support her son’s ministry.

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<sup>83</sup> Backus, *Gospel Comfort*, 20.

<sup>84</sup> Grenz, *Isaac Backus—Puritan and Baptist*, 64.

<sup>85</sup> Backus, “*Accounts of Journeys, December 2, 1750*,” Isaac Backus Papers, (RG 280), Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library. Box 2. Isaac identifies his grandmother as “My father’s mother, who experienced a remarkable change in her younger years, and lived to a good old age. She died August 24<sup>th</sup> 1762, aged ninety-four.” Backus, *Gospel Comfort*, 23.



## *Separation*

The third example of Elizabeth exercising her religious freedom concerns her decision to separate from the Congregational Church of Norwich in 1745. It is in this act of separation in Elizabeth's life that mirrors the broader denominational patterns of the Separatists' origins. As the fervor of the revivals increased, dissension arose within the established churches. By 1744, Rev. Lord began actively working with other ministers in Connecticut to quench the revivals and ban the famed George Whitefield from entering their pulpits.<sup>86</sup> The impetus for separation from the Norwich church occurred in 1745, when the church approved a vote to no longer require individuals to give a public relation of their experience for membership.<sup>87</sup> A second reason for separation revolved around Rev. Lord's request to join the Association of New London county. The Association was established upon the Saybrook Platform, the top-down structure of the Platform conferred a great deal of authority upon the minister. Rev. Lord wanted his congregation to adopt this centralized form of church polity due to his Old Light sentiments and his desire to gain financial stability. Despite this, the congregation voted against his request.<sup>88</sup> Following these events, in February 1745, an initial group of thirteen individuals,

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<sup>86</sup> Frederic Denison, *Notes of the Baptists, and Their Principles, in Norwich, Conn., From the Settlement of the Town to 1850*, (Norwich, CT: Manning, Printer., 1857), 20.

<sup>87</sup> Bumsted argues that the initial reason for separation did not revolve around the vote because it occurred the day after Hugh Calkins and Jedidiah Hide left the church; however, this does not mean that it was not a factor for the Backus's and later Separatists. Bumsted, "Revivalism and Separatism in New England," 602.

<sup>88</sup> Bumsted calls into question the traditional presentation of the Separatists' reasons for separation from the Congregational Church of Norwich. Concerning Rev. Lord's interest in the Saybrook Platform, Bumsted describes the Separatist's treatment of this issue as a "polemical offense." Bumsted, "Revivalism and Separatism in New England," 588-612.

including Elizabeth and Isaac Backus, separated from the church and established their own church known as the Bean Hill Congregation.<sup>89</sup>

In August 1745, nine days before George Whitefield arrived in Norwich, Rev. Lord penned an address to twelve of the members who separated from his congregation. The letter required the Separatists to appear before the established church and answer for their separation.<sup>90</sup> It was during this hearing that Rev. Lord recorded the reasons given for these individuals' separation.<sup>91</sup> The four women who gave their reasons for separation were Elizabeth Backus, Phebe Calkins, Lydia Kelly, and Mary Lathrop. In the records, all four of these Separatist women are identified in relation to their husbands. Elizabeth is identified as "the Widow," again tying Elizabeth's status and identity to her deceased husband. The next woman, Phebe, is described as "the wife of Hugh Calkins," the Separatists held meetings in their home. Similarly, the only identifying descriptions given

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<sup>89</sup> These members included Hugh Calkins, Phebe Calkins, Jedidiah Hide, William Lathrop, Samuel Leffingwell, Joseph Grisworld (a Deacon), John Smith, James Backus, Isaac Backus, Elizabeth Backus, John Leffingwell Jr., Daniel Chapman, and Lydia Kelly (the wife of Joseph Kelly).

<sup>90</sup> The original letters addressed to various individuals are housed at the Connecticut State Library with a series of other records concerning the Norwich Congregational Church and the events surrounding the separation of its members. See "Scrapbook containing papers relating to the First Church in Norwich during the Ministry of Rev. Benjamin Lord, D.D., chiefly in his handwriting, Arranged 1859 By Daniel C. Gilman Librarian of Yale College." Conn. St. Lib., call no. 974.62 N841f.

<sup>91</sup> If these Separatists wrote down their reasons for separating, the documents do not survive. It is only the multiple records from Rev. Lord concerning these events and a later document written by Isaac Backus, detailing his reasons for separation, that are in existence today. Even though Rev. Lord was not a neutral character, he recorded the Separatists' reasons multiple times, and the consistency of these recordings suggests his credibility concerning the accounts. Isaac Backus, "Reasons of Separation," Isaac Backus Papers, (RG 280), Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library, Box 7.

concerning Lydia Kelly and Mary Lathrop are the names of their husbands, Joseph Kelly and William Lothrop.<sup>92</sup>

These women responded to the Congregational Church Council in two ways: deference and declaration. Phebe and Elizabeth refrained from speaking and deferred to the other Separatists who stated their reasons for separating. During the church meeting on August 28, 1745, Phebe Calkins asked “to be excused from saying anything;” whereas, Elizabeth said, “little, but in general [she] said her reasons were the same with others.”<sup>93</sup> These first two responses reflect the broader cultural norm of female subordination dominant within the Congregationalist Church. As has been demonstrated previously, by the mid-eighteenth century, women did not speak publically in the Congregational Church but instead deferred to their male superiors.

In contrast, Lydia and Mary declared their reasons for separating, which were in agreement with the male Separatists. These women were able to bolster their position by identifying with their male counterparts, who in the eyes of the Congregational establishment carried a greater deal of authority. These two responses signify the individuals’ comfort level with asserting their own voice in the midst of religious questioning. Elizabeth was willing to participate in the act of separation, but she was not willing to make a public statement. Whereas, Lydia and Mary confidently outlined their

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<sup>92</sup> Denison, *Notes of the Baptists*, 20-22. Denison identifies Mary as the wife of William, however the spelling of their last name differs. The name Lathrop and Lothrop represent different branches of the same family. I will maintain the spelling Denison employs in his work. Lydia Kelly’s husband Joseph, however, was not identified as one of the original Separatists. It is not clear as to when or if Joseph Kelly separated. In a memoranda dated December 24, 1755, neither Lydia’s nor Joseph Kelly’s names are listed as separating from the Congregational church. Benjamin Lord, “Separates, 1755,” Norwich. First Congregational Church, Connecticut State Library, Box 110.

<sup>93</sup> Denison, *Notes of the Baptists*, 22.

reasons for separation. This instance demonstrates a way in which Elizabeth tempered her expression of religious freedom. The decision to separate did not only affect these women's spirituality, but their role in society. In the eighteenth century, the Congregational church was the organizing structure of society. An individual's citizenship, ability to vote, and social interactions were determined by the established church; therefore, separating from the church entailed separating from one's community.

### *The Bean Hill Separatists*

In total, "thirty male members, including one deacon, and a large number of females, left the Old Standing Church," and joined the Separatist congregation at Bean Hill.<sup>94</sup> In addition to Elizabeth and Isaac, those within the Backus family that left the Congregational church included Elizabeth's brother-in-law James, her sons Samuel and Simon, her mother-in-law, and her brothers Isaac and Hezekiah Tracy.<sup>95</sup>

During the early years of the Separatist congregation, a number of guest preachers filled the pulpit until the church could obtain a minister. Upon hearing the call of God to the ministry, Isaac preached his first sermon on September 28<sup>th</sup> 1746, to the Bean Hill congregation. Isaac preached from Psalm 53 and following the sermon he was recognized by the congregation as a lay preacher. McLoughlin states that the brethren of the church probably gave Backus "a written statement of their approbation," which in the eyes of other dissenting groups certified Backus's authority to preach.<sup>96</sup> Elizabeth would have

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 19-21.

<sup>95</sup> McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition*, 22.

<sup>96</sup> Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 1:7 n. 11.

been present at this meeting to hear her son preach. The commissioning of her son into the ministry would have been a joyous occasion for Elizabeth.

For the first two years of their existence, the congregation did not have a permanent minister. On October 30, 1747, the congregation ordained one of their own, Jedidiah Hide. He served the congregation for a decade. During this early period, Elizabeth describes to Isaac the joyful state of her soul, she states, "The Lord hath sweetly comforted and quickened my soul from time to time: I have had many sweet love-feasts: The Lord hath brought me into his banqueting house, and his banner over me was love."<sup>97</sup> Elizabeth's words demonstrate that she believed she was continually blessed by the Lord and desired to share this blessing with others.

Two years later, in March 1750, Elizabeth rejoiced to Isaac concerning a revival that took place in the Bean Hill Church. The revival preaching started at the beginning of February and lasted for three weeks. During this time many were converted and encouraged in their faith.<sup>98</sup> According to a letter from Elizabeth in August 1750, the fruits of the revival continued to flourish into the late summer.<sup>99</sup> Elizabeth's correspondences with Isaac contained a great deal of information about the events of the Bean Hill congregation, Elizabeth served as an informant for Isaac within the Separatist movement.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Elizabeth Backus, "January 11, 1748," *Gospel Comfort*, 22.

<sup>98</sup> Elizabeth Backus, "March 26, 1750," *Gospel Comfort*, 23-4.

<sup>99</sup> Elizabeth Backus, "August 27, 1750," *Gospel Comfort*, 24.

<sup>100</sup> For a detailed example of this see Elizabeth Tracy Backus, "Backus, Elizabeth (Tracy) to Backus, Isaac: July 5, 1753" (1753). *Brown Archival & Manuscript Collections Online*. Brown Digital Repository. Brown University Library. <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:200650/>

## *Persecution*

The fourth instance of Elizabeth asserting her religious freedom manifests itself in her refusal to pay the ecclesial tax. Every citizen of Norwich was required to pay the ecclesial tax, which supported the salary of Rev. Lord. Upon separation, many Separatists refused to pay the tax, compounding a previously established problem with the reverend's payment. Originally, upon Rev. Lord's settlement at the Congregational Church in 1717, he was allotted an annual salary of £100.<sup>101</sup> In the decade prior to the rise of Separatism, Douglas Winiarski identified, "between 75 and 80 percent of all families appearing on a series of annual tax lists during the 1730s were represented by one or both parents...Of the 110 households appearing on all of the Norwich tax lists between 1730 and 1739, 91 percent eventually affiliated."<sup>102</sup> Despite these facts, the Congregational Church was not able to compensate Lord's salary according to yearly inflation rates. Lord's personal records disclose that the community, "had over the period of years before 1740 fallen nearly £1000 behind the 'just amount,' with a 'failure of payment' ranging from £7.10 to £85 registered without exception annually."<sup>103</sup>

In tandem with a continual lack of payment, by 1748 the rising number of Separatists meant that they held the majority vote in the Society Meetings, which

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<sup>101</sup> Caulkins, *History of Norwich, Connecticut*, 287. Until the late 1790s, currency in America was designated in pounds, shillings, and pence. Each unit was separated by a dash. Twenty shillings equaled a pound and twelve pence equaled a shilling. Bruce P. Stark, "RG 003, New London County, County Court Files Inventory of Records," Connecticut State Library, no. 8. [https://ctstatelibrary.org/RG003\\_NLCC\\_Files.html](https://ctstatelibrary.org/RG003_NLCC_Files.html).

<sup>102</sup> Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light*, 112.

<sup>103</sup> Benjamin Lord to Norwich First Society, October 10, 1757, Norwich First Society Papers, Conn. St. Lib. as cited in Bumsted, "Revivalism and Separatism in New England," 589-599.

determined Lord's yearly salary. The Congregational Church was willing to dismiss the Separatists from paying the ecclesial tax, in order to reestablish control over their churches' finances. The General Court, however, ignored the Congregationalists' request and forced them to hire collectors to obtain the ecclesial tax each year. William McLoughlin states that during, "the winter of 1752-1753, over forty Separatists (men and women) were imprisoned for refusing to pay their religious taxes."<sup>104</sup>

The previous historical narratives present Elizabeth Backus as being imprisoned in 1752 for not paying the minister's rate, these events need to be nuanced in light of historical records.<sup>105</sup> The degree to which individuals refused to pay the minister's rate in Norwich is clarified when compared with the "Rate Bills" of Rev. Lord.<sup>106</sup> In contrast to what the secondary sources purport, Elizabeth and the other Separatists are recorded as paying a yearly rate. Unfortunately, no record books could be located that concerned the period before separation, therefore, it cannot be determined if Elizabeth significantly decreased her giving. Elizabeth's yearly payments ranged from her lowest in 1751 at £0.16.11 to her highest in 1757 at £7.8.3.<sup>107</sup> Following her imprisonment in 1752 Elizabeth paid £5.0.6, the second highest amount recorded during this thirteen-year timeframe. It is possible that upon Separation, Elizabeth paid the minimum amount each year, which was severely decreased from what a woman of her financial status should

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<sup>104</sup> McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630-1833*, 374.

<sup>105</sup> McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630-1833*; Bumsted, "Revivalism and Separatism in New England;" Caulkins, *History of Norwich, Connecticut*; Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times*.

<sup>106</sup> Benjamin Lord, "Rate Bills, 1744-1757," Norwich. First Congregational Church, Connecticut State Library, Box 110. The surviving records cover the first decade after separation, from 1744 to 1757.

<sup>107</sup> Lord, "Rate Bills, 1744-1757."

have been paying. Thus, in the winter of 1752 the hired collector took liberty in enforcing the full payment of the minister's rate. This information complicates the original narrative that Elizabeth and other Separatists were imprisoned simply for not paying the ecclesial tax at all.

### *Imprisonment*

The fifth example of Elizabeth's display of religious freedom is recounted in a letter she wrote to Isaac on November 4, 1752, detailing her experience in prison. Elizabeth's surrender to imprisonment for her religious convictions impacted Isaac and many others because she was not only a woman but a widow of prominent standing in the Norwich community. Although Isaac had left the Bean Hill church in 1748, to pastor the Separatist Church of Middleborough, Massachusetts, a circular pattern of influence occurred between Elizabeth and Isaac. Initially, Elizabeth's imprisonment influenced Isaac to stand firm in his present circumstances amidst congregational turmoil concerning baptism.<sup>108</sup> In addition to this, Isaac would go on to publish the details surrounding his mother's actions in *A History of New-England: With Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians Called Baptists* and in *Gospel Comfort for Mourners*.<sup>109</sup> Through these publications, Isaac ensured the historical memory of Elizabeth as "the widow Backus" who was imprisoned for not paying the ecclesial tax.

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<sup>108</sup> In 1752, the Middleborough Congregation was in the midst of a dispute over the proper mode of Baptist. In July 1751, Isaac declared his belief in believer's baptism. The church would remain in a state of disarray until it dissolved in 1756 and the First Baptist Church of Titicut was established by Isaac. Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times*.

<sup>109</sup> Backus, *A History of New-England*, 98-99; Backus, *Gospel Comfort*, 25-27.



Prison epistles are another form of document that can be examined to identify the distinct gendered experience of Separatists. In the same way that women's conversion narratives can be contrasted with men's conversion narratives, so too can women's and men's prison epistles be juxtaposed to demonstrate their gendered experience. In Isaac Backus' *A History of New-England*, in addition to his mother's letter, Isaac includes a letter from Charles Hill to Rev. Lord.<sup>110</sup> A comparative analysis of these two letters will demonstrate the diverging ways in which Elizabeth and Charles used scripture in their prison epistles.

The collectors took Elizabeth from her home on October 15, at nine o'clock in the evening during a rainstorm. She remained in prison for thirteen days. During this time, Elizabeth had many visitors who were telling her conflicting news. It is not clear as to what these mixed statements entailed, but it is possible that they concerned the purpose and duration of her imprisonment. In her letter to Isaac, Elizabeth identifies several other individuals from the Bean Hill congregation who were imprisoned around the same time as her: Samuel Backus Jr., Charles Hill, Isaac Tracy, Isaac Sabins, Joseph Griswold, and Ebenezer Grover. Prior to Elizabeth's imprisonment Deacon Griswold was imprisoned on October 8<sup>th</sup>. The day after Elizabeth was imprisoned, Charles Hill and Isaac Sabin were also placed in prison. Similarly, the day before Elizabeth wrote her letter to Isaac on November 4, another congregant member, Ebenezer Grover, was imprisoned.

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<sup>110</sup> In addition to Elizabeth's letter, Isaac Backus also includes details concerning the imprisonments of Separatists, such as Elisha Paine, Charles Hill, Esther and David White in his *History*. Isaac's information surrounding Esther's imprisonment shines greater light on another woman's experience in prison. Further research concerning the experience of Esther and other women from the Bean Hill congregation could expand upon the history surrounding female religious dissent and persecution. Backus, *A History of New-England*, 97-99.

Elizabeth employs the same type of passive language in her prison epistle that she used in her conversion narrative. Instead of actively encountering these various spiritual events in prison, Elizabeth describes these experiences as being brought about by a greater power beyond herself. For instance, Elizabeth states, “the innumerable snares and temptations that beset me.”<sup>111</sup> Elizabeth did not view herself as bringing about these temptations, but something oppressing her, such as Satan. She became so overwhelmed by her circumstances that she began to question God’s faithfulness to her. Elizabeth did not, however, remain in this depressed state for long, because of “the condesention of heaven!”<sup>112</sup> Elizabeth understood the Lord as descending into her present circumstances, in which she “found Jesus.”<sup>113</sup> Elizabeth’s description of God’s condescension is another example of her use of passive language and describing herself as being acted upon.

Elizabeth then goes on to equate the prison with a furnace. This imagery draws upon the account in the book of Daniel concerning Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who were thrown into a fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar. In describing the prison as a furnace, Elizabeth invoked the Biblical account and identified her own experience with the experience of these three men. Elizabeth also states, “though I was bound...yet was I loosed.”<sup>114</sup> Although Elizabeth found herself being physically bound, she was spiritually set free from her previous bondage to temptations. Elizabeth’s description of herself as being loosed is another example of her using passive voice.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

Elizabeth's discovery of Jesus's presence in prison allowed her to relinquish her worldly cares in submission to him. She states, "then I could give up my name, estate, family, life, and breath, freely to God."<sup>115</sup> This is an extreme claim for Elizabeth to make. First of all, as described above, her name carried a great deal of weight in the Norwich community. Secondly, upon the death of her husband Samuel, at an early age, Elizabeth inherited one-third of his £7,000 estate. Thirdly, Elizabeth and Samuel had eleven children. As a woman in the eighteenth century, Elizabeth's primary duty was raising children. Culturally, she was responsible for the early education and spiritual upbringing of her children. Finally, Elizabeth's life and breath were threatened during her imprisonment. After this experience, Elizabeth would continually express a lack of fear surrounding death. This is made explicit in her personal letters, in which she reflects upon death and states, "death is no terror to me."<sup>116</sup>

After Elizabeth discovered Christ and relinquished her worldly cares, the prison was transformed in her eyes from a furnace to a palace. She was no longer affected by the "laughs and scoffs made at" her.<sup>117</sup> Instead, she was able to bless the Lord and love those who despised her. Elizabeth quotes Jesus's command in Matthew 22:39 to "love your neighbor as yourself." She was able to forgive others and she desired the same forgiveness. Due to her close encounter with God during her imprisonment Elizabeth believed she was able to fulfill this command. Elizabeth understood the imprisonment of

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Elizabeth Backus, "Norwich, October 22, 1750" and "Norwich, June 16, 1760," in *Gospel Comfort*, 24, 31.

<sup>117</sup> Backus, *A History of New-England*, 98-99.

Separatists as requiring “humiliation.”<sup>118</sup> In other words, humbling oneself before God was necessitated through imprisonment. This idea that it was necessary to humble oneself can be seen in other Protestant practices. One way in which the Bean Hill Church participated in a corporal act of humility entailed the setting aside of a day for fasting and prayer, a common practice among Protestants of the time. Prayer and fasting were viewed as pious acts that humbled the individual and drew them nearer to God’s will. The entire Separatist congregation, therefore, sought to engage in this collective act in order to seek understanding concerning God’s purpose for their persecution. Elizabeth turned the suppressive act of imprisonment into a display of her religious freedom through her spiritual encounter with God. By sharing the details of her experience, Elizabeth provided the Separatist community with assurance in the midst of persecution.

Once released from prison, Elizabeth did not know “by what means” she was set free.<sup>119</sup> Later sources identify Elizabeth’s son-in-law, Gen. Jabez Huntington, as paying her tax to release her from prison. Subsequently, her grandson, Gen. Jedidiah Huntington continued to pay Elizabeth’s annual rate, so that, “the venerable lady might not be disturbed by any solicitations for that purpose.”<sup>120</sup> Rev. Lord’s record books make no indication of this substitutionary payment; nonetheless, one should note that Jabez

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid. Isaac Backus recorded in his *Diary* about visiting Esther White while in prison. He describes her as being “in a sweet frame” and “wonderfully upheld by divine power in her sufferings.” See Backus, “Wednesday, March 11, 1752” and “Wednesday, October 14, 1752” in *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 1:197, 251.

<sup>119</sup> Backus, *A History of New-England*, 98-99.

<sup>120</sup> Caulkins, *History of Norwich, Connecticut*, 323. Gen. Jabez Huntington married Elizabeth the daughter of Samuel and Elizabeth Tracy Backus in 1741-2. See Mary E. Perkins, *Old Houses of the Antient Town of Norwich, 1660-1800*, (Norwich, CT: Press of the Bulletin Co., 1895), 283.

Huntington paid the highest rate of anyone in the community, consistently giving over thirty pounds annually.

In contrast to Elizabeth's spiritualized experience in prison, is Charles Hill's condemning letter to Rev. Lord concerning the same type of experience. As previously mentioned, Charles was imprisoned the day after Elizabeth and they shared the same physical space in jail. Their perception, however, of this experience differs greatly. Charles wrote his letter while still in prison on November 1. He begins by indicting Rev. Lord for not visiting the prisoners, and therefore, necessitating the writing of the letter. Charles goes on to quote Matthew 25:40 in an effort to convict Rev. Lord of treating the Separatists poorly. This passage invokes the judgment scene in heaven, wherein God either accepts or rejects individuals based on their treatment of others. Charles goes on to attack Rev. Lord's character and identify him as a negligent pastor.

In Puritan form, Charles spends the remainder of his letter invoking scripture in order to convey his message. Charles implores the entire corpus of scripture by beginning with the book of Genesis and concluding with an allusion to the book of Revelation.<sup>121</sup> In each scriptural reference Charles builds upon his main point that the use of violence against others is in contradiction to the will of God. Charles deliberately chose these passages because he identifies Rev. Lord's use of his ecclesial position, to have the Separatists arrested for not paying the minister's rate, as a direct abuse of power. He implies that God only knows if Rev. Lord will experience the wrath of God in the final

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<sup>121</sup> Scriptural allusions include, Genesis 49:5-7, Micah 3, John 18:36, Matthew 26:52, and Revelation.

days due to his actions in persecuting the Separatists. Charles concludes by identifying himself as “a prisoner of hope.”<sup>122</sup>

Although the intended audience of these two letters from Elizabeth and Charles are different, they both concern the respective person’s prison experience. Biblical literacy was paramount in the religious culture of eighteenth-century New England. The *lingua franca* entailed the use of Biblical imagery and terms among the people. Elizabeth’s employment of scripture, however, served to illustrate her spiritual experience in prison while in contrast, Charles’s engagement with scripture was used as an indictment against the actions of Rev. Lord. As a woman Elizabeth would not have been able to write such a scathing letter to a Standing Minister, whereas Charles, was able to write such a letter condemning Rev. Lord. Charles used scripture to assert his authority against Rev. Lord. Elizabeth, on the other hand, accepted her imprisonment as a humbling encounter before God. She saw scripture as providing her with an interpretive lens to view her experience.

#### *A Return to the Bean Hill Congregation*

The follow events recount the final years of Elizabeth’s life and the declining state of the Separatist community. By 1757, the Bean Hill congregation was divided and lacked a minister following the removal of Rev. Hide due to disciplinary issues

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<sup>122</sup> Backus, *A History of New-England*, 98-99. Similarly, Rev. Elisha Paine employs imagery from the book of Revelation in his prison letter to the Canterbury assessors. He references the wrongful use of “the sword” against others and the first Beast of Rome.

surrounding his excessive drinking.<sup>123</sup> Elizabeth reports in a letter to Isaac that a select group of Separatists met down the hill to listen to the preaching of Rev. Hide.<sup>124</sup> The remainder of the Bean Hill congregation called Rev. John Fuller in 1758/9, as their minister. Fuller was a member of the church since its establishment, and he had previously joined Isaac on his first preaching tour in 1746. Fuller was soon succeeded by Gamaliel Reynolds in 1762.

Through the appointment of Reynolds, the broader denominational shift occurring within Separatism, towards anti-paedobaptist views, is identifiable within the Bean Hill Congregation. In the fourth year of Reynolds' pastorate, he declared that he held to Baptist principles and was baptized by Elder Ichabod Allen on November 8, 1766. According to McLoughlin, Reynolds' conversion is the first step toward anti-paedobaptism in Norwich.<sup>125</sup> Other congregants soon followed in Reynolds' footsteps and received believer's baptism.<sup>126</sup> Isaac's aunt was one of those individuals. This instance in the Norwich congregation is an example of the broader denominational patterns, in which Separatists began to adopt Baptist views in the 1750s and 60s.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Backus, "*Accounts of Journeys, Nov. 28, 1757,*" Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library. Isaac Backus Papers. Box 2.

<sup>124</sup> Elizabeth Tracy Backus, "Backus, Elizabeth (Tracy) to Backus, Isaac: August 22, 1758 " (1758). *Brown Archival & Manuscript Collections Online*. Brown Digital Repository. Brown University Library. <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:200688/>.

<sup>125</sup> Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 1:99 n. 3.

<sup>126</sup> Following the above described events, it appears that the Bean Hill congregation remained a mixed group of Separatists and Baptists until 1779. In one of Isaac's diary entries from June 1780, he records traveling to Norwich and preaching at the meeting house where "Elder Renolds society have lately begun to meet...religion is at a low ebb here." See Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 3:1052. By 1788, the remaining congregants had adopted Universalist beliefs. See Denison, *Notes of the Baptists*, 27.

<sup>127</sup> McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, 425.

These events occurred three years before Elizabeth's death; however, there are no records indicating that she held Baptist views. It is unlikely that she did, due to the fact that Isaac had become a Baptist minister a decade earlier and makes no mention of his mother leaving the Separatist tradition. Although Elizabeth did not share the same views as Isaac surrounding the sacrament, she was able to identify with her son's struggles due to her own experiences of affliction. In a letter written just seven months after her imprisonment, Elizabeth reminds Isaac that God "hath punished us less than our iniquities do deserve; yea, and of his own free gift hath bestowed drops of heaven on a poor worm in my weakness."<sup>128</sup> Elizabeth's ability to write this after enduring imprisonment for her religious views is a testament to her faith. In similar fashion, evidence of Elizabeth's support for her son as a Baptist minister can be found in a 1759 letter to Isaac. In this letter, Elizabeth describes her desire for him to "be faithful in the place where God hath set you, both in public and in private, to warn sinners to flee from the wrath to come."<sup>129</sup> Elizabeth's statement demonstrates that although she did not hold to the same theological views as Isaac, she believed in God's providential placement of Isaac in his Baptist congregation.

### *Deathbed Scene*

One of the ways in which women were included in public life was through the publication of a funeral sermon upon their death. This practice emerged out of the Puritan

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<sup>128</sup> Elizabeth Backus, "May 18, 1753," *Gospel Comfort*, 27.

<sup>129</sup> Elizabeth Backus, "April 6, 1759," *Gospel Comfort*, 31.



tradition, popularized by Rev. Cotton Mather.<sup>130</sup> Funeral sermons constitute their own genre in which the individual being memorialized is often idealized. In the case of funeral sermons concerning women, the woman was often presented as virtuous, pious, and one to be imitated. This is in contrast to funeral sermons concerning men, who were remembered for their “political accomplishments or social status.”<sup>131</sup>

In 1769, Isaac incorporated the genre of the Puritan funeral sermon into the Separate-Baptist tradition on the occasion of the death of his mother. Isaac received the news of his mother’s death on a Sunday afternoon. He proceeded to preach a sermon in memory of Elizabeth on 1 Thessalonians 4:14. In the same year Isaac published the sermon with a spiritual biography outlining Elizabeth’s faith and a selection of her personal letters to Isaac which displayed her “sincere Christian” life.<sup>132</sup> Isaac explicitly states in his concluding remarks, “What I aim at, is to engage your attention to the *beauties of holiness*, which shined in her, that you may *imitate* her lively and lovely example.”<sup>133</sup> The high esteem with which Isaac held his mother is evidenced through the contents of this publication. Isaac aptly bestowed upon Elizabeth the title “Mother in our Israel.” It is in the context of her role as a “long and faithful pillar of the [Separatist]

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<sup>130</sup> Cotton Mather, *Maternal Consolations: An Essay on the Consolations of God*, in Eighteenth Century Collections Online, (Boston: Printed by T. Fleet, for Samuel Gerrish, at the North-side of the Town-House, 1714); Desiree Henderson, “The Imperfect Dead: Mourning Women in Eighteenth-Century Oratory and Fiction,” *Early American Literature* 39, no. 3 (2004): 487-509. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 23, 2018).

<sup>131</sup> Henderson, “The Imperfect Dead: Mourning Women in Eighteenth-Century Oratory and Fiction,” 487.

<sup>132</sup> Backus, *Gospel Comfort*, 35.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

church” that Elizabeth demonstrates the interplay of religious freedom and female subordination in eighteenth-century New England.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 151.

## CHAPTER FOUR: SUSANNA MASON BACKUS—DAUGHTER OF CHRIST

Susanna Backus serves to extend this historical narrative through her involvement in the Separatist and Baptist traditions. The ways in which Susanna exercised her religious freedom are fully in line with the established social structures acceptable for women in the eighteenth century. Susanna's religious activism occurred in the first decade of her faith as a Separatist and later as a Baptist, covering the period of 1745 to 1756. Once she and Isaac settled in the Baptist tradition, the degree to which she publicly engaged in religious acts diminished. One reason for this decrease in religious actions likely occurred due to Susanna's increasing domestic obligations. Susanna had nine children from 1750 to 1768. Following this period of intensive pregnancy and childbirth, Susanna continued to fade from the historical records while at the same time the Baptist tradition gained credibility through the founding of Rhode Island College in 1764, and the establishment of the Warren Association in 1767. Following the birth of their ninth child culminating with the formation of these two institutional structures, Isaac does not mention Susanna in his diary until her death, thirty-two years later. These factors will be examined in order to identify the ways in which Separate-Baptist women asserted religious freedom and the gendered implications of denominational maturation.

### *Family Heritage*

Susanna was raised with Baptist sentiments because she descended from a line of English Baptists. She was born in Rehoboth, Massachusetts on January 4, 1725, to Samuel and Rebeckah Read Mason. Her great-great-grandfather, Sampson Mason (d. 1676) was a Six Principle Baptist who fought in Cromwell's Army before immigrating to

Dorchester, Massachusetts in 1650. Sampson later purchased land in Rehoboth, upon which his children settled, in addition to settling in the adjacent town of Swansea. Sampson's seventh son, Isaac Mason, was appointed as a deacon of the Second Baptist Church of Swansea upon its founding in 1693. Subsequently, at least four other Mason men were ordained to the pastorate of the Six Principle Baptist church in Swansea, Massachusetts.<sup>135</sup> Unique to the Six Principle Baptists was their interpretation of Hebrews 6:1-2, which led them to practice the ritual of laying on of hands. Other than Susanna's extended family's prominence in the Baptist tradition, little is known about her personal upbringing in the faith. Concerning her childhood, Susanna describes herself as living "a careless life for many years."<sup>136</sup> Statements similar to this were common among converts during the Awakenings, often fixating on their sinful state before conversion. In 1745, Susanna experienced her own conversion during the fervor of the Awakenings in Rehoboth.

Four years after Susanna declared her faith as a Separatist, she married the up-and-coming Separatist preacher Isaac Backus. The two had previously met while Isaac was itinerating throughout Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. Just prior to their marriage, Isaac had been ordained the minister of the Separatist Church of Titicut, Massachusetts. Susanna's newly established role as a wife was then complicated by Isaac's professional status. Susanna was not simply a wife, but a minister's wife, which carried additional societal expectations.

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<sup>135</sup> Backus, *A History of New-England*, 435. Joseph Mason was ordained as the churches minister in 1709, and served in this role until his death in 1748. Three of Pelatiah Mason's (1669-1763) sons were ministers of the church: Job Mason (1695-1775) was ordained minister in 1738; Russell Mason (b. 1714) was ordained in 1752; and John Mason (b. 1716) was ordained in 1788.

<sup>136</sup> Backus, *Gospel Comfort*, 40.

The dual relationship concerning Susanna's marriage to Isaac and Isaac's pastorate of the church framed a number of standards upon Susanna as the minister's wife. The sheer number of women present in the Separatist church at this time created a demographic who the wife of a minister could reach in a way that her husband could not. Isaac describes Susanna's "exemplary walk and conversation" as causing her "to be highly esteemed by her acquaintance in general."<sup>137</sup> In a similar way to Elizabeth's status as a widow, Susanna's status as the minister's wife conveyed upon her cultural standards that impacted her participation in exercising her religious freedom.

### *Pious Nature*

Piety was a dominant quality attributed to and sought after by Christian women in the eighteenth century. Piety does not merely concern an individual's actions, but also their demeanor when carrying out those actions. As previously noted, a shift occurred between the seventeenth and eighteenth century within the cultural perception of women. No longer were women viewed as the weaker vessels ruled by their seductive passions, and therefore, needing to be subjugated to men; instead, women were viewed as "more pious than men and their superior religious feelings were a natural endowment of the sex."<sup>138</sup> William McLoughlin describes Isaac as portraying Susanna "as a pietist would, primarily in terms of her spiritual character, her dedication to God, her faithfulness in rearing her children in a pious way, and her devotion to the duties of a wife and

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>138</sup> Malsheimer, "Daughters of Zion: New England Roots of American Feminism," 484; Ulrich, "Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735," 20-40.

mother.”<sup>139</sup> Susanna’s role, therefore, as a Separatist minister’s wife necessitated her exemplification of this character trait. Isaac himself praised Susanna as his “greatest temporal blessing which God ever gave me, for nearly fifty one years, for which I trust I shall praise him to eternity.”<sup>140</sup> Additionally, Susanna is described by Isaac’s biographer, Alvah Hovey, as a “devout” woman.<sup>141</sup> While these statements about Susanna’s nature were probably true, they also represent the cultural impositions placed upon certain women to conform to broader socio-religious norms.

A common refrain uttered by pious Christians included the desire to be “swallowed up” in God.<sup>142</sup> An example of this desire in Susanna’s life is evident surrounding the birth of her first child, Hannah. After giving birth, Isaac describes Susanna as “her Soul is swallowed up with a sense of God’s great Goodness and mercy towards her.”<sup>143</sup> A few days later Isaac states, “The Lords mercies Still continue towards my Dear family; my Dear Wife has had Sweet refreshings of Soul Especially last evening She was much Swalloed up and overcome with a Sense of Divine goodness and filled with Self-lothing, for her impatience, Unbelief and unthankfullness.”<sup>144</sup> After giving birth, Susanna experienced a sense of relief and gratitude towards God for delivering her through the difficult process of childbirth, which resulted in Susanna being consumed by her love for God. At the same time, Susanna lived within a set of cultural constraints that

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<sup>139</sup> McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition*, 65.

<sup>140</sup> Backus, “An Account of the Life of Isaac Backus,” Isaac Backus Papers, (RG 280), Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library. Box 2.

<sup>141</sup> Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times*, 307-8.

<sup>142</sup> Winiarski provides several examples of this phrase being used by various individuals. Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light*, 175, 235, 305, 387.

<sup>143</sup> Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 1:108.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

imposed an ideal pious framework upon her and imparted guilt on her for her feelings of unbelief and thanklessness prior to giving birth.

Finally, Susanna's personal piety instigated within her an evangelistic concern for the salvation of others. Hovey describes Susanna's piety as leading her to be "thoughtful and affectionate" towards others.<sup>145</sup> In Susanna's own account from January 15, 1758, she plead, "O God, awaken and turn them to thyself. While thy judgments are abroad in the earth, may we the inhabitants learn righteousness."<sup>146</sup> She desperately desired salvation to come to all over-and-against what she understood to be their damnable alternative. This examination of Susanna's pious nature serves to demonstrate a cultural imposition placed upon Susanna as an eighteenth-century woman.

### *Church Actions*

Susanna's public involvement in church affairs, as recorded by Isaac, occurred during the early formation of the Separate-Baptists, from 1745 to 1756. Susanna's religious actions entailed the participation of other female congregant members; this serves to reinforce the sexual egalitarianism that was characteristic of the early Separate-Baptists, and counter-cultural in comparison to the established church. The effects of Susanna's religious actions can be observed in her verbal profession of faith before the Separatist congregation of Titicut, her attempt to reconcile the Titicut congregation, as well as her signing of the Middleborough Baptist church covenant. Additionally, the

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<sup>145</sup> Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times*, 307-8.

<sup>146</sup> Backus, *Gospel Comfort*, 46.

distinct nature of Susanna's role as a Separate-Baptist minister's wife can be identified by her location in the church pews.

The first recorded instance of Susanna asserting her religious freedom occurred through her seeking membership at the Separatist Church of Titicut. Her voice was liberated from the social confines of her sex through the declaration of her faith; this occurred on September 9, 1750, in tandem with her desire for communion with the Separatist Church of Titicut. This was the first Sacrament Sunday the church had observed in over a year.<sup>147</sup> Internal divisions concerning baptism led to the delay in observing the Lord's Supper. Susanna gave her testimony to the church along with another sister, Abigail Pierce. In Isaac's diary entry concerning this day, he states, "It Seemed it affected the whole Church."<sup>148</sup> In other words, the congregation was greatly moved by Susanna's actions and testimony. In a sense, Susanna was not the only person liberated by this religious action as her faithfulness impacted the entire Separatist congregation. The sharing of conversion narratives were recognized by ministers as producing edification among the congregation, in addition to meeting the individual's requirement for membership.<sup>149</sup>

The details that Susanna would have shared with the congregation, surrounding her conversion, can be surmised from Isaac's "A Short Account of Mrs. Susanna

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<sup>147</sup> Concerning the Congregational church context, Winiarski notes that it was common for individuals seeking church membership to "time their admissions to coincide with the celebration of the Lord's Supper." The example of Susanna and Abigail demonstrates the continuity of this practice over time and between denominations. Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light*, 43.

<sup>148</sup> Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 1:98.

<sup>149</sup> Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light*, 397; Bremer, "To Tell What God Hath Done for They Soul," 652 n. 84.



Backus.”<sup>150</sup> Susanna’s conversion narrative is typical of the common conversion experience during the Awakenings. She was “awakened” at the age of twenty by the revival preaching of Rev. Andrew Croswell in 1745.<sup>151</sup> She then entered into an extended period in which she wrestled with her sins and desire for conversion. During this time, she attended the Separatist meetings of Mr. Joseph Snow in Providence, Rhode Island.<sup>152</sup> Following this, Susanna was able to identify an exact day, April 12, 1746, on which her conversion experience transpired. Two years later, on August 17, 1748, Susanna was baptized by the newly-ordained, Separatists minister, John Paine in Rehoboth, Massachusetts.<sup>153</sup> Susanna underwent believer’s baptism a year before her marriage to Isaac. This suggests that she would later serve to influence his decision to accept believer’s baptism.

Susanna, like Elizabeth, uses passive language in her conversion narrative. She describes the Lord as letting “me further into my own heart” through which He showed her the depths of her sin.<sup>154</sup> She also describes herself as being “brought to see” her

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<sup>150</sup> Backus, *Gospel Comfort*, 40-43.

<sup>151</sup> Andrew Croswell was born in 1709 in Charlestown, Massachusetts. He graduated from Harvard in 1728, and was ordained at Groton, Connecticut in 1738. In October 1748, he served as minister of the Congregational Church of School Street, Boston. He held New Light sentiments and had separated from the established church. He is often described as a radical or controversial individual due to his eccentric views and support of James Davenport. Albert Matthews, ed., *Plymouth Church Records, 1620-1859*, vol. 22, (Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1920), xxxiv.

<sup>152</sup> Joseph Snow Jr. was born in Bridgewater, Massachusetts on March 26, 1715. He was converted during the revivals of 1741 alongside his father Joseph Sr., a blacksmith. He was ordained in Providence on February 12, 1747 and appointed the minister of a Congregational Church. Backus, *A History of New-England*, 373.

<sup>153</sup> Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 1:56 n. 1. McLoughlin does not cite where this information comes from.

<sup>154</sup> Backus, *Gospel Comfort*, 40-1.

sinfulness and “led back to view that eternal covenant.”<sup>155</sup> Although Susanna expressed feelings of liberation from sin upon her conversion, the passive language she employs demonstrates the sociolinguistic boundaries which constrained her. Though Susanna employs this passive language in her conversion narrative, the fact that she is allowed to publicly testify supports the claim that early Separatists and Baptists demonstrated a new form of egalitarianism.

The second example of Susanna’s “exemplary walk” in her faith is evidenced in her attempt to renew the Titicut Church Covenant alongside three other women. Following Isaac’s rejection of paedobaptism in July 1751, the division within the church was solidified and a series of church councils commenced in an effort to reconcile the congregants. Although Isaac rejected infant baptism, he maintained open communion and allowed congregants to bring in other ministers to perform infant baptism. Two of his congregants, Samuel Alden and Robert Washburn, however, rejected Backus’ position and demanded he affirm infant baptism. In May 1752, a council ruled that Alden and Washburn “were guilty of setting up a bar which they ought not against the reception of the pastor.”<sup>156</sup> In addition, the council required all of the church members to submit themselves before God and renew their covenant with one another. Isaac records, however, that only four women went forward to renew the covenant—one of whom was Susanna.<sup>157</sup> Susanna’s action demonstrates her desire to maintain congregational unity among the members of the Separatist church. This instance also attests to the

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<sup>155</sup> Backus, *Gospel Comfort*, 40-1.

<sup>156</sup> Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times*, 98.

<sup>157</sup> The church was only able to maintain their present state of mixed communion for another four years. Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 1:208-211.

egalitarianism of the early Separate-Baptists, due to the fact that women, of their own accord, were able to present themselves for covenant renewal without the support of male congregants.

The third religious action that Susanna participated in entailed her role as a founding member of the First Baptist Church of Middleborough. The egalitarian makeup of the Middleborough Baptist churches founding members is highlighted when compared to the standard requirements for founding a Congregational church. Early Congregationalists required the presence of seven men to constitute a church, with no mention of women's roles in the process. Instead, these seven men were required to prove to each other their personal knowledge of Christian doctrine and their own experience of saving grace. Then, upon satisfaction, ministers from the surrounding churches were called upon to affirm the formation of the new congregation.<sup>158</sup> In contrast to this practice, the Middleborough Church was founded by three men and three women. In 1756, the Separatist Church of Titicut dissolved and the remaining six members affirmed believer's baptism and organized the first Baptist Church of Middleborough.<sup>159</sup> Isaac and Susanna were two of these six founding members. Isaac was appointed the minister and wrote the new church's Covenant of Faith. Susanna was one of the six members and three women to sign the new church's covenant.

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<sup>158</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 88.

<sup>159</sup> Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times*, 117, 119 n. 1. This follows the pattern identified by McLoughlin concerning Separatist churches evolution into Baptist churches, as described above. The six members included Isaac Backus, Timothy Bryant, John Hayward, Susanna Backus, Mary Caswell, and Esther Fobes. During Isaac's fifty-year pastorate, the congregation averaged just under one hundred members. The church's membership peaked in 1788 at 173 members. See Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 1:401 n. 1.

Susanna's signing of the Covenant provides the clearest insight into her theological views. No evidence survives that suggests Susanna disagreed with the theological tenets expressed in the document. If anything, Hovey describes Susanna as "sympathizing with him [Isaac] in his religious opinions, and desires, and labors."<sup>160</sup> In addition, Susanna's Baptist family lineage and her personal decision to undergo believer's baptism prior to Isaac, support the claim that Susanna and Isaac held similar theological views. These included orthodox Calvinist beliefs regarding the Trinity, the authority of scripture, creation, original sin, providence, election, the person of Christ, the communion of saints, and the Resurrection. These new Baptists sought to set themselves apart in their Covenant from other Christian groups in their affirmation of Sunday as the Sabbath and the role of civil government outside of religious matters.<sup>161</sup> The second part of the Covenant concerns church affairs; the affirmation of the visible church, the requirement of believer's baptism to partake in the Lord's Supper, the fencing of the Table, congregational polity, the role of the minister and deacons, and the development of spiritual gifts.<sup>162</sup>

Interestingly enough, the above three instances concerning Susanna's religious actions always occurred alongside other female congregant members. Susanna did not perform these actions independently; instead, she was joined by other women who also

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<sup>160</sup> Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times*, 307-308.

<sup>161</sup> Due to the persecution of churches outside of the establishment, this statement was necessary both to demonstrate the Baptist's allegiance to the civil government and to distinguish them from abuses they faced. The separation of church and state has become an identifier for Baptists, and Isaac served as a founding father in establishing this principle.

<sup>162</sup> "The Confession of Faith and Covenant of the Church of Christ in Titicut, signed Jan. 16, 1756," Isaac Backus Papers, (RG 280), Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library. Box 6.

desired to express their own religious authority. At the same time, Susanna's title as the minister's wife would have afforded her a distinct reputation upon undertaking such actions.

The distinction of her particular role as a Baptist minister's wife is highlighted when compared to her counterparts in the Congregational church. An example of this can be observed in Susanna's location in the church pew. Leonard Sweet identifies the best seat in the Congregational meetinghouse as belonging to the minister's wife, describing it as "a high, isolated, solitary pew beside the pulpit and facing the congregation."<sup>163</sup> The physical nature of the Congregationalist minister's wife's seat as set apart from and looking out upon the rest of the congregation signaled her distinguished role within the church. In the case of the early Baptist churches at least two factors contributed to the lack of interest in establishing a special seat for the minister's wife. First, the low congregational polity of the Baptist church did not differentiate the minister and his wife from the laity, which was in contrast to the Congregational church. Second, the construction of meetinghouses was a new endeavor for these early Baptist churches that had been meeting in congregants' homes. Baptists were more concerned with the ownership of their church building than with the need to differentiate the minister's wife by her location in the pew.

The lack of physical differentiation in the Baptist church may have offered Susanna a sense of liberty from being placed on display in front of the congregation. The records of the First Baptist Church of Middleborough shed light on Susanna's location in the pews. In 1759, the new meetinghouse was nearing completion, and the church began

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<sup>163</sup> Sweet, *The Minister's Wife*, 18.

to sell pews to the congregants to raise funds to pay for the cost of construction. The congregation's adherence to voluntarism necessitated the selling of pews to make enough money to pay for the new meetinghouse. Elder Backus did not purchase the first, second or third pew, but the fourth pew for his family. Instead, Deacon Shaw, one of the overseers and a large financial contributor to the project, purchased the first pew.<sup>164</sup> Susanna did not sit in front of the congregation as a model female representative on display. Instead, she sat with her children among the congregants. Her location among the congregation communicated an emphasis on the family and community.

### *Motherhood*

An examination of Susanna's responsibilities in raising her children and maintaining the household demonstrate two factors that contributed to women's decreased involvement in church matters. Susanna's commitments as a mother entailed the spiritual obligation to raise her children in the faith. As the size of a woman's family increased, her time and ability to invest in other ministerial opportunities decreased. During the timeframe, described above, concerning Susanna's public involvement in church affairs she had four children. She went on to have five more children between 1758-1768. During this portion of Susanna's life, there are no records of her serving independently of Isaac in the church. A woman typically had a period of fifteen to twenty years during which she would give birth nine to twelve times with a span of twenty-five months between pregnancies. Although infant mortality rates were on the decline, a

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<sup>164</sup> Isaac Backus, "IB, Account of Nathaniel Shaw with Middleborough Baptist Society (also includes 12/7/1759 (2) and 6/23/1760 documents)," Isaac Backus Papers, (RG 280), Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library. Box 8.

mother could expect to have one or two children die before their first birthday.<sup>165</sup> For eighteen years Susanna was either pregnant or nursing a newborn child with an average of twenty-three months between births.<sup>166</sup> What is notable about Susanna's birthing years is that she did not lose a single child.<sup>167</sup>

During a woman's birthing years, a common source containing information concerning childbirth is the husband's diary. Although it was not typical for a husband to write about his wife and household affairs, he would include the event of childbirth due to its disruptive (yet anticipated) nature in everyday life.<sup>168</sup> Isaac kept a spiritual diary in which he recorded daily events interpreted through the lens of a pietistic tradition. Susanna is rarely mentioned in Isaac's diary except in exceptional cases such as childbirth. It is ironic that the Christian view of marriage—as a spiritual union of husband and wife before God, which mirrors Christ's marriage to the Church—did not influence Isaac's assessment of his relationship with Susanna as concerning spiritual matters that should be recorded in his diary.

One instance in which Isaac provides a description of his and Susanna's relationship in his diary concerned the events surrounding the birth of their second child and first son, Nathan. Isaac understood Susanna and himself to be "Companions and helpers together in journeying thro' this evil World to the heavenly rest."<sup>169</sup> After

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<sup>165</sup> Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 129.

<sup>166</sup> The shortest period of time between births was nineteen months between Hannah and Nathan. While the longest period of time between births was thirty-six months between Eunice and Susanna.

<sup>167</sup> Isaac and Susanna would later experience the death of their youngest daughter Sibel in 1788 at the age of twenty.

<sup>168</sup> Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 139.

<sup>169</sup> Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 1:219.

spending time in prayer together concerning the birth of their child, Isaac describes experiencing the greatest sense of “Clearness and united Oneness” in their prayers than ever before.<sup>170</sup> The act of childbearing had a spiritual impact on the lives of Isaac and Susanna. Isaac includes this event in his diary because it was a spiritual experience coupled with the exceptional birth of a child. The absence of Susanna from Isaac’s diary demonstrates that Isaac separated his own spirituality from his relationship with Susanna. Isaac’s pastoral ministry was largely carried out apart from Susanna through frequent trips to preach and address congregational matters. This absence also validates the view that as the church—and on a larger scale the Baptist denomination—matured, Susanna’s public role was no longer as prominent.

One of the main responsibilities of Susanna as a mother concerned the “training up [of] her children in the nature and admonition of the Lord.”<sup>171</sup> It is interesting to note that in this statement, Hovey draws upon Ephesians 6:4. In this verse, Paul is addressing the fathers to train up their children. By the eighteenth century this responsibility had moved into the maternal realm. The responsibility to ensure that children were properly brought-up in the faith was a heavy burden placed upon mothers.

Isaac’s day-book provides insight into the education of the Backus children. On October 14, 1760, Isaac records that he paid Jacob Eddy Jr. twelve shillings for “schooling our 3 child.”<sup>172</sup> At this time, these three children would have included ten-year-old Hannah, eight-year-old Nathan, and six-year-old Isaac. The Backus’ had three

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times*, 307-308.

<sup>172</sup> Backus, “Isaac Backus’ Day Book.” Isaac Backus Papers, (RG 280), Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library. Box 2.



other children at this time who were below the age of schooling: five-year-old Eunice, two-year-old Susanna, and new born baby Lois. Two factors stand out in the analysis of this brief entry. First, formal education in Massachusetts was expanding to include girls. The presence of Hannah among her two brothers in the above list serves to demonstrate this cultural change. In the seventeenth century, girls were only legally required to learn to read while boys were schooled in the art of writing. By this point in the mid-eighteenth century, however, female literacy rates were drastically increasing.<sup>173</sup>

Second, it can be reasoned that Susanna served as the primary educator of her children until the age of six. On a piece of paper that recorded the results of the 1751 church council at Titicut, one of the Backus children practiced their handwriting. The phrase “Childhood and youth is vanity but to fear the Lord is wisdom” repeats itself a number of times on the page in a shaky yet legible hand.<sup>174</sup> This phrase echoes the preacher of Ecclesiastes 11:10. The document serves as a material object that demonstrates the way in which Susanna integrated her responsibility to raise her children in the faith with their education in spelling and grammar.

Isaac’s ministerial role impacted the Backus’ life, including the paper upon which the children practiced their writing. The spheres of ministry and the home were intertwined in the Backus family. This document also demonstrates the limited resource of paper at this time. Isaac could have kept all things pertaining to his ministry separate

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<sup>173</sup> Gloria L. Main, “An Inquiry into When and Why Women Learned to Write in Colonial New England,” *Journal of Social History*, 24, no. 3 (Spring, 1991): 579-589. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3787816>.

<sup>174</sup> The Council took place on Oct. 2, 1751, at which the division in the church at Bridgewater & Middleborough over Baptism was discussed. The notes were transcribed by Nathanael Draper. “Results of Council at Titicut in Bridgewater,” Isaac Backus Papers, (RG 280), Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library. Box 7.

from his family so that an incident like using a church record for grammar practice did not occur. He did not do this; instead, Isaac and Susanna both valued the spiritual status of their children's souls over material goods.

### *Household Duties*

The transition from sect to denomination within the Baptist tradition can be observed in the congregation's use of the Backus' home. For the first three years of the Baptist Church of Middleborough's existence, the congregation met on the Backus' property. Susanna was, therefore, constantly responsible for opening her home up to visitors and large groups of people. After these initial three years the congregation built a meetinghouse; consequently, the Backus' home was no longer necessary as the central meeting place. The building of a meetinghouse was one of the first steps towards the Baptist's formalization; however, this resulted in stripping Susanna of her previous role in opening her home up for the church.

In order to understand the particular household duties Susanna would have been responsible for, the Backus' financial status must be taken into consideration. In accordance with the Baptists' fight to receive exemption from paying the ecclesial tax, the Baptist Church of Middleborough adhered to a voluntary system of paying their minister. Isaac would not have been able to support his family on this income alone. Fortunately, he had inherited a large portion of land in Norwich from his father.<sup>175</sup> After

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<sup>175</sup> A deed survives from 1749 identifying Isaac as selling seven acres of land to his brother Simon. See "IB, Deed of sale to Simon Backus Sept. 13, 1749," Isaac Backus Papers, (RG 280), Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library. Box 7. In November 1750, Isaac purchased 32 acres and 10 rods of land from James Keith. In December of that same year, Isaac sold over fifty-five acres of land in Norwich, twenty-

marrying Susanna, Isaac began to sell off this land and invest the money elsewhere. The Backus' lived on a large acreage in Middleborough upon which they farmed. In addition to the income from the Backus' farm, Isaac acted as an agent for his brother Elijah's iron mill in Yantic, Connecticut. Isaac also made a small income through the selling of his books.<sup>176</sup> He was able to remain financially independent of his parishioners, which in the long run proved advantageous for himself and his family. The Backus' financial status sets them apart from other Separate-Baptist ministers of their time who did not have other financial means to depend on outside of their congregation.<sup>177</sup>

Subsistence farming was the way of life for many families in the eighteenth century. No matter the size of a family's property, there were a multitude of tasks to tend to in the cultivation of crops. Men typically took on the manual labor of tending the fields and harvesting the crops, while women were responsible for the garden, orchards, chicken coops, and dairy.<sup>178</sup> Inside the home, women cooked meals, sewed clothing, cleaned the home, and tended to a variety of household chores. The Backus family did not own slaves; however, Susanna did have the assistance of an apprenticed servant girl.<sup>179</sup> The Backus' sons would have been raised to work in the fields and the daughters

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four of which were to his brother Simon. See "IB Cash and Land Transactions 1749-1751"; "IB Deed of sale to Simon Backus, Dec. 10, 1750," Isaac Backus Papers, (RG 280), Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library. Box 7. In May 1760, Isaac purchased 20 acres of land from Hannah Robbin an Indian woman. He paid the eighty-one pounds sixteen shillings and eight pence in twelve months to her guardians Josiah Edson Jr., Nathaniel Smith, and John Turner. See Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 1:518.

<sup>176</sup> From 1754 to 1805 Isaac published 39 books.

<sup>177</sup> McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, 406.

<sup>178</sup> Smith, *Women's Roles in Eighteenth-Century America*, 67.

<sup>179</sup> McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition*, 66.

would have assisted Susanna in household chores. Particular to the minister's wife was the added need to manage the household resources in a frugal manner so that the husband could focus on his ministerial tasks. The frequency and distance to which Isaac traveled for his ministry would have required Susanna to tend to a number of chores outside of the standard woman's role.

An examination of Isaac's day-book can illustrate the dichotomy surrounding Susanna's liberty in managing the home and her constraint to the domestic sphere. Isaac describes Susanna's "prudence and economy" as doing much to support their family; yet, she appears to have no control over the families finances.<sup>180</sup> In the day-book, only Isaac recorded incoming and outgoing transactions concerning the farm and household needs. Some common entries include the pasturing of different families' animals on the Backus' farm and the purchasing of goods: butter, meats, sugar, fabric, thread, shoes, and books. The making and repairing of shoes is the most common entry, which is not surprising considering the Backus' had nine children. From 1760-1769, Susanna is mentioned only once in the day-book; the entry concerns the purchase of a new pair of shoes.<sup>181</sup> It is safe to presume that the majority of goods purchased would have been directly under the supervision of Susanna. She would have been the one cooking, baking, and preserving all of the food. She would have been the one making and mending clothing using fabric and thread. Although Isaac may have acquired and kept a record of the finances, Susanna would have been the one notifying Isaac as to what items needed to be purchased for the household.

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<sup>180</sup> Backus, *Gospel Comfort*, 50.

<sup>181</sup> Backus, "Isaac Backus' Day Book."

Concerning Susanna's preservation of the household, Hovey describes her as possessing "those womanly virtues which make home peaceful and attractive. She was frugal, looking well to the ways of her own household."<sup>182</sup> Although Hovey is writing in the mid-nineteenth century during the height of the cult of true womanhood, his assessment of Susanna's frugality parallels Isaac's own presentation of Susanna. Hovey identifies the woman as being responsible for the peaceful and attractiveness of the home. This claim carries implications for Susanna's responsibilities. In order to remove household distractions from Isaac so that he could focus on his ministry, Susanna not only had to be "frugal" and take care of the household chores, but she also had to maintain a certain type of atmosphere in the home.<sup>183</sup> The type of peaceful and attractive environment in the Backus home would have derived from Susanna's piety, thus the home's peaceful nature would have an inherent spirituality. Similarly, the home's attractiveness would have entailed simplicity. By examining Isaac's day-book it is evident that extravagant and nonessential items did not have a place in the Backus' home.

### *Ministerial Labors*

After 1756, Susanna begins to fade from Isaac's religious records. Isaac only mentions her in regard to a few trips she joined him on and in relation to the births of their five other children. After 1768 there is a thirty-two-year span in Isaac's diaries during which time he does not mention Susanna until the events surrounding her death; Susanna's silence during this period is in alignment with the Baptist denominations

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<sup>182</sup> Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times*, 307-308.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

institutionalization. The one religious event Isaac links Susanna to during this period are the revivals of the 1780s for which, “she most heartily rejoiced, and was much engaged.”<sup>184</sup> Instead of serving publicly in a particular church role, Susanna devoted her spiritual services to the rearing of her children and the support of Isaac’s ministry. This transition mirrors the Backus’ settlement into the Baptist church. Stability in the faith resulted in Susanna altering her spiritual focus. Susanna was publicly active in her faith when faced with persecution and internal church strife. Once these pressure points were removed, she too retired from her public role and focused her attention on the insular ministry of her immediate family. Susanna’s support of Isaac’s ministerial labors took on three forms, opening up their home for church affairs, serving as a conduit for the church in Isaac’s stead, and accompanying Isaac on visitations.

First, the majority of Susanna’s support for Isaac’s ministry occurred in the household sphere. She was responsible for maintaining the home, providing lodging for visitors, opening up their home for church meetings, and spending extended periods of time at home while Isaac traveled to preach. Through an analysis of Isaac’s travel logs, the exceptional amount of annual travel serves to shed light on Susanna’s support of Isaac’s ministry. In a given year, Isaac would travel an average of fifteen hundred miles and preach two hundred sermons.<sup>185</sup> The development of the denomination and the lack of ministers to fill the Baptist congregations springing up throughout New England necessitated Isaac’s extensive travels. From 1740 to 1770 thirty-two Baptist churches

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<sup>184</sup> Backus, *Gospel Comfort*, 50.

<sup>185</sup> These averages were arrived at by identifying the mean number of miles traveled and sermons preached in 1767, 1772, 1777, 1780, 1781, 1787, 1797. Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, vol. 3.

formed in Massachusetts alone.<sup>186</sup> In his lifetime, Isaac also embarked on two extended trips for the advancement of the Baptist cause. The first trip occurred in 1774, when Isaac attended the first Continental Congress in Philadelphia for two months.<sup>187</sup> The second trip occurred in 1789 when the Warren Association sent Isaac as an agent to North Carolina and Virginia for five months.<sup>188</sup> During Isaac's extended periods of travel, Susanna remained at home. She bore the primary responsibility of sustaining the household by performing daily chores, managing the business of the farm, rearing the children, and attending church in Isaac's absence. It appears that no Baptist women participated in these trips on behalf of the denomination; women were not allowed to participate in religious endeavors outside of the church, especially those that involved politics.

Second, the absence of Isaac from the pulpit elevated Susanna's symbolic status as a representative of the minister. She served as a conduit for Isaac by relaying messages from his letters to the congregation. Isaac's letters to Susanna during his long absences serve as objects that demonstrate the removed, yet informed, role of Susanna as the minister's wife. In these letters, Isaac openly discusses the details of his work with Susanna. During his five-month trip to North Carolina and Virginia in 1789, Isaac wrote one of his lengthier letters to Susanna, explaining why he would not be returning home for some time and the work he was doing to share the gospel. He concludes by stating, "I hope the above consideration will satisfy you & our people that I followed the line of

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<sup>186</sup> McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, 436.

<sup>187</sup> Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 2:912-923; "Account of Journeys Sep. 26—Oct 14, 1774," Isaac Backus Papers, (RG 280), Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library. Box 2. This manuscript recounts the events of the Philadelphia trip.

<sup>188</sup> Isaac was away from January 10<sup>th</sup> to June 18<sup>th</sup> during this time he travelled 1,251 miles and preached 117 sermons in North Carolina and Virginia. Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 3:1273.

duty in coming into this country and also in tarrying so long.”<sup>189</sup> He wrote to Susanna with such precise details concerning his travels not only to inform her about his activities, but also so that she could pass along the message to the rest of the Middleborough congregation. During his extended absences, Isaac relied on Susanna to convey messages to the congregation. In order to justify his extended stay, Isaac emphasized his evangelistic duty to convert the lost. Susanna and the Baptists of Middleborough could not have denied Isaac this salvific responsibility.

The third area Susanna supported Isaac’s ministerial labors occurred outside of the home through her occasional accompaniment of Isaac upon ministerial errands. This was a common practice among minister’s wives. Susanna traveled with Isaac to neighboring towns where he would preach, visit congregant members, and attend other local churches to hear the preaching of various ministers. Before 1768, Isaac recorded in his diary instances where Susanna would travel with him on preaching tours. Their most frequent trips would entail traveling to either of their hometowns of Norwich or Rehoboth.<sup>190</sup> During these shorter trips, they would visit with friends and family along the way and Isaac would preach in a number of neighboring towns. Isaac and Susanna would also visit friends and congregational members locally in Bridgewater and Middleborough.<sup>191</sup> These visits often occurred when a congregant had died, was sick, or had not attended church for a period of time. In other cases, these house visits entailed

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<sup>189</sup> “IB to Susanna Backus; from Chesterfield, Va., March 9 1789,” Isaac Backus Papers, (RG 280), Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library. Box 14.

<sup>190</sup> Backus, *Diary of Isaac Backus*, 161-5, 311-313, 421, 451.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.



sweet “Christian conversations” among the Backus’ and their congregants.<sup>192</sup> These examples display the ways in which Isaac’s pastoral ministry was both independent from Susanna and yet required her to play a public role as the minister’s wife.

Susanna’s role as Isaac’s helpmeet necessitated her support of his ministry, yet Isaac does not include details in his diary concerning Susanna’s contribution to ministerial tasks. There is no indication that Sunday schools or small group discussions were occurring outside of the regular church meetings. In fact, Susanna does not appear to endeavor upon her own ministerial tasks within the church. This could be a product of the early stage of the Separate-Baptist denomination and their lack of organized ministries. In addition, the dominant role motherhood played in the life of Susanna contributed to her absence from ministerial involvement following her signing of the 1756 church covenant. Susanna’s continued absence from church affairs, particularly after 1780 when all of her children had reached adulthood, suggests that other external factors were influencing to her lack of involvement.

Being married to a minister of Isaac’s capacity would have required a great deal of sacrifice and devotion on the part of Susanna. The nature of being a Separate-Baptist minister in the eighteenth century required Isaac to preach multiple times a day. In addition, the Baptist Church of Middleborough met on the Backus’ property for the first three years of its existence. Isaac was, moreover, not just a minister; he also made a living as an author, farmer, and an agent for his brother’s iron mill. These facts demonstrate the ways in which Isaac’s life was occupied by a variety of tasks in addition to his ministry, all of which took place outside of the home. In contrast, Scholar Leonard

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 310.

Sweet describes the marriage of Susanna and Isaac as an example of “being married to a husband who happened to be a minister rather than a minister who happened to be a husband.”<sup>193</sup> This claim can be contested due to the extensive time Isaac spent away from home traveling to other churches in the region to preach, implement church discipline, and later attend Associational meetings.

### *Deathbed Scene*

A final evaluation of the events surrounding Susanna’s death will demonstrate the compounding tension present in eighteenth-century women’s lives. At this time, piety could be expressed through one’s actions during the “deathbed scene.” Erik R. Seeman describes this event as entailing a “resignation to God’s will, a well-grounded (not overly confident) hope that one was saved, and temperately offered final counsels.”<sup>194</sup> On the one hand, Susanna’s pious death represents liberation from this earthly life into the desired heavenly life. On the other hand, it represents the burdens imparted upon women to adhere to a certain set of cultural standards of piety, even in death. Isaac concludes his “A Short Account of Mrs. Susanna Backus” with the events surrounding Susanna’s death. The information Isaac provides suggests that he knew the necessary components of the deathbed scene and that he desired Susanna to be remembered for her pious death.

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<sup>193</sup> Sweet, *The Minister's Wife*, 19.

<sup>194</sup> Erik R. Seeman, *Pious Persuasions: Laity and Clergy in Eighteenth-Century New England*, Early America, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 44.

Susanna died from jaundice and dropsy in her stomach.<sup>195</sup> She suffered enormously in her final days; however, Isaac describes her as not complaining. Rather, when Elder Rathbun came to visit the Backus' and prayed with her, Susanna stated, "I'm not so much concerned about living or dying, as to have my will swallowed up in the will of God."<sup>196</sup> As outlined in the case of Elizabeth, the coalescing of one's will with God's exemplifies a pious response to death. Susanna proclaimed something similar to Elder Cornell five days later when he came to pray with her. Isaac identified Susanna as not able to eat or drink much for weeks without being sick; however, she endured her pain and did not express any fear of death. The suppression of pain and the shunning of fear at death are two more characteristics that were sought after to distinguish an individual as pious. Susanna died early in the morning of November 24, 1800, at the age of seventy-five, having died an appropriately pious death.

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<sup>195</sup> Lois Backus Allen, "Allen, Lois (Backus) to Backus, Simon: January 31, 1823" (1823), *Brown Archival & Manuscript Collections Online*, Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library.  
<https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:200573/>

<sup>196</sup> Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 3:1462.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

A careful examination of the lives of Elizabeth Backus and Susanna Backus, with attention placed on their acts of dissent, allows one to identify the ways in which Separate-Baptist women sought to obtain religious freedom. Ironically, Isaac Backus' efforts to maintain religious freedom for Baptists resulted in the suppression of women's freedom within the denomination. A general pattern exists, in which there is an initial period of religious egalitarianism, during which women play an active role in asserting their religious views, followed by the suppression of women's voices through the formalization of the tradition. The Backus women's lives parallel the broader denominational patterns of development and institutionalization. By examining the particular events of Elizabeth and Susanna's lives, the effects of denominational structures on women's religious freedom can be observed.

The Backus women accepted their roles as wives and mothers who were to operate within the home and not in economic or political matters; however, this does not mean that either woman was unwilling to exercise her autonomy through religious dissent. Additionally, both Elizabeth and Susanna's religious actions occurred during the first two decades of the development of the Separate-Baptist tradition, in the 1740s and 1750s, with both women impacted by the 1740 Awakenings. Elizabeth's first act of asserting her religious freedom entailed her initial conversion in 1721, and her subsequent spiritual awakening in 1741. Similarly, Susanna's first act of asserting her spiritual autonomy is marked by her own conversion experience, which took place during the Awakenings. Both women serve as examples of the effects revivalism had on the pre-existing Congregational Church and the Baptist Church. Elizabeth's experience

represents the trajectory of a Congregationalist who adopted New Light sentiments and separated from the established order. On the other hand, Susanna provides greater insight into the experience of individuals who had ties to the old Baptist tradition, but espoused New Light opinions following the revivals.

Elizabeth's third act of religious dissent entailed her separation from the Congregational Church of Norwich. She understood herself to be following God's will; therefore, any religious action that was perceived by the established church as one of dissent, Elizabeth interpreted as an act of devotion to God's will. Upon evaluating the Separatist women's reasons for separating it became clear that the women responded in two ways, with the same goal of maintaining unity. Either they would not state their own reasons and agree with the other Separatists, or they would state their own reasons when in agreement with the other Separatists. Elizabeth's response entailed the former, which demonstrates the lingering influence of the Congregational church in which women did not speak out independently of men.

One element concerning the initial phase of denominational development entails the persecution of the minority group by the majority group. In the case of the Separatist tradition, the height of religious persecution occurred between 1752-1753, the same timeframe in which Elizabeth was imprisoned for her refusal to pay the full amount of the ecclesial tax.<sup>197</sup> The tenuous evidence surrounding Elizabeth's payment of the minister's rate was identified by examining Rev. Lord's record books. Although this work focused on evaluating Elizabeth's experience in prison, further research is necessary to expand

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<sup>197</sup> McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630-1833*, 374.

upon this narrative and shed light on the forty individuals that were imprisoned in Norwich between 1752-1753, for their refusal to pay the ecclesial tax.<sup>198</sup>

In the life of Susanna, these same years mark the occasion in which Isaac began pastoring the Middleborough Baptist Church. Yet again, the early 1750s represent the period during which a number of Separatists began to profess Baptist beliefs surrounding baptism. This developmental period in the Separate-Baptist tradition is marked by religious egalitarianism, in which women found their voices within their congregations. It has been demonstrated that Susanna made her voice heard through the sharing of her conversion narrative in the Separatist Church of Titicut. Similarly, her signature to the Middleborough Church Covenant represents the equal membership she shared as a woman with the other male members in founding the church. Previously, Susanna's religious actions were not taken into account by historians, as her life was overshadowed by the career of her husband. Through the contribution of this research, Susanna's experiences can now be incorporated into further research and the larger narrative on Separate-Baptist women.

Ultimately, the end of Elizabeth's life coalesced with the decline of the Separatists. By 1769, the majority of Separatists had either adopted Baptist views or returned to their Congregationalist churches. Elizabeth's actual death mirrors the symbolic death of the Separatist tradition. In contrast, Susanna always held to believer's baptism. Her life represents the fusion of the Separate-Baptists. Unfortunately, her life also highlights the effects of institutionalization upon women. By the mid-1760s, Susanna's religious activism disappears from the historical records. All that can be

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

surmised is that during the proceeding eight years Susanna gave birth to four children. Susanna's life became consumed with raising her children, while Isaac traveled the Colonies to further the Baptist agenda. Women were not apart of the Baptist Denominations' Grievance Council and they were not invited to attend the Continental Congress—at which Baptists addressed their desire for religious freedom. Leading Baptists' subsequent attempts to petition legislature did not entail the input of women. This case study of Elizabeth and Susanna's lives has demonstrated that women were able to obtain a localized form of religious freedom within their Separate-Baptist congregations, but they were not allowed to engage in the broader political debates surrounding religious freedom and disestablishment. The honorific titles, "Mother of Israel" and "Daughter of Christ" did not apply outside of the individual's religious community in the broader socio-political climate of her time.

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